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MAID ELLICE.

A Novel.

BY

THEO. GIFT,

AUTHOR OF "TRUE TO HER TRUST," "PRETTY MISS BELLEW,"
"MORE THAN A WOMAN'S LOVE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



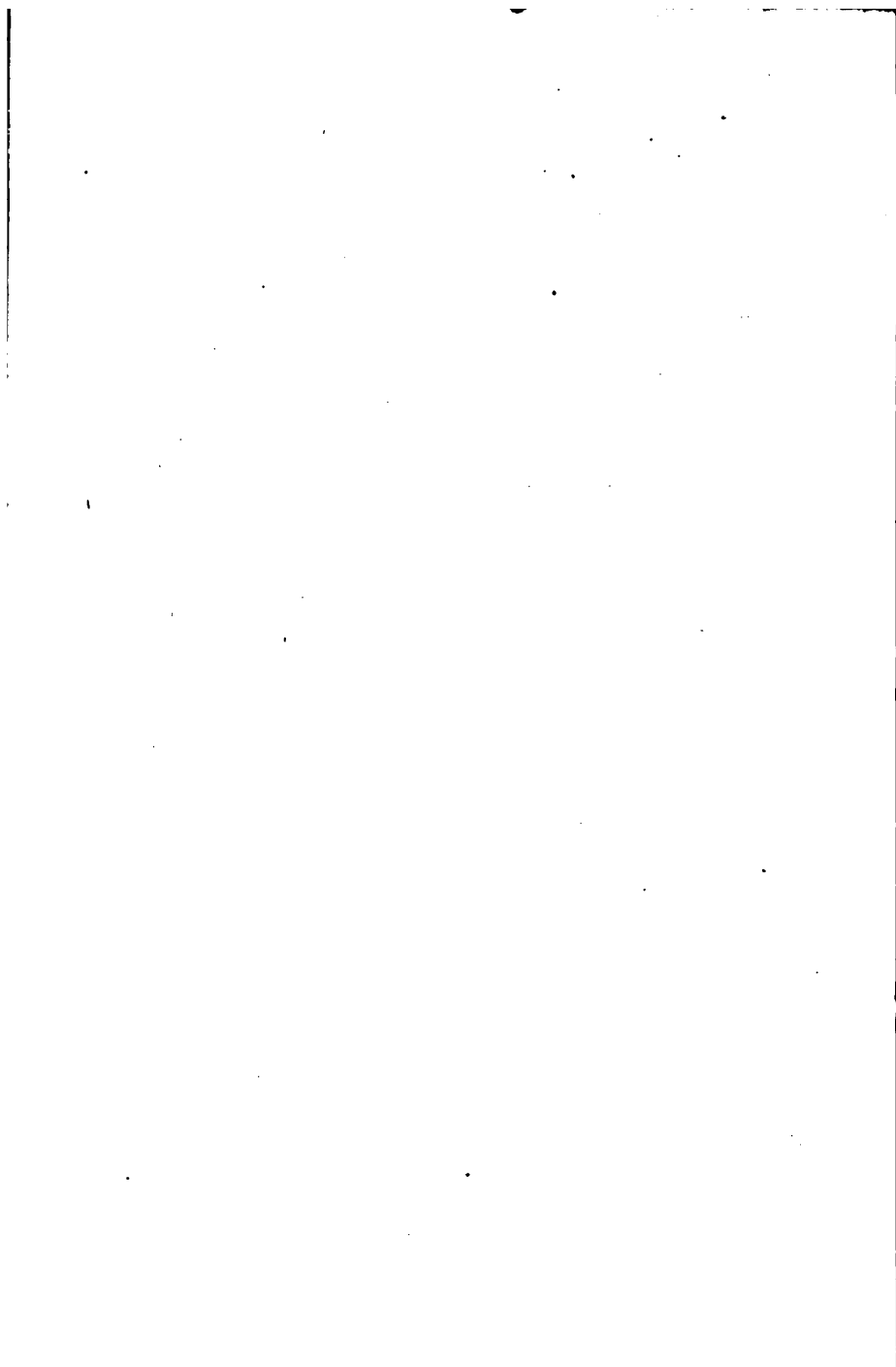
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MAID ELLICE.



CHAPTER I.

AND here I think it is time to go back to Ellice, who, while her lover was in such sore straits, both as to the mind and body, and her lover's family in such grievous trouble, was quietly established at No. 3, Phillimore Gardens, Campden Hill, the guest of her aunt, Mrs. Devereux; and a much duller and less entertaining guest than that lady and her daughter were at all in the habit of bargaining for.

It had not been by any means of her own will that she had left Herncroft. Nay, but for the poor old Squire and Gordon combined, she might have been there now, waiting on

the bereaved wife and mother, and taking away one great source of pain and heartache from Robin by her presence ; but though the old man's sudden and terrible seizure, following so instantly on his burst of wrath, might have blotted out the memory even of his angry words from the girl's heart—Women have a trick of forgetting themselves and their private feelings before any sudden trouble to their lords and masters—it was quite a different matter with Gordon. He had frequently seen men in fits before ; aye, and for that matter women also ; seizures of many kinds being in their most violent forms no rare occurrences in the back slums of Clerkenwell where so much of his leisure time was spent, and where unrestrained passion and drunkenness are not unfrequently brought to a climax in such manner ; and for that reason the Squire's "stroke," terrible as it was—so terrible indeed to the two women as to utterly unnerve their powers for thinking and acting—affected him far less than the accusations levelled against his adopted sister, and the letter which Margaret had written in her flight. It did not indeed appear so at the moment, his nature being one of those

which rarely show their deepest feelings on the outside ; and poor little Ellice was so unhappy and bewildered at the accumulation of trouble that had fallen on them, and so grateful for his presence and helpfulness, she did not notice the looks of stern and anxious inquiry which he cast on her from time to time, or the coldness and brevity of his manner. The crisis was too terrible for her to have time to think about herself just then ; and though the tears kept rolling down her cheeks as she flew about the house trying to make herself as helpful as she could in the emergency, it was really a source of comfort and gratulation to her that it was on Gordon rather than herself that all seemed to depend for assistance, from carrying the Squire upstairs in the first instance, to galloping off to the nearest town to procure leeches, after the doctor's arrival, and later to the station to telegraph, as we have already seen, both to London and Scarborough.

The latter, indeed, was not his own idea, being prompted by Mrs. Herne's constant wail as she hung over her husband's motionless body, " If Robin were here, if Robin were only here !" But the former was a precaution

which would not have occurred to either of the others until too late for it to be of use ; and so Ellice told him when she met him at the house-door on his return. The night was long past by then, the doctor gone (though only for a time) and the morning sun shining gaily in at the old-fashioned parlour where the home party had held their lengthened vigil on the night before. There was no one there now ; and its rays only served to light up Ellice's pale cheeks and tumbled hair and the dark circles round her eyes. Mrs. Herne's one request had been, "Don't let any one know as Maggie has left us. She'll never come back if it once gets about," and since then she had hardly spoken to Ellice ; nor had the latter seen much of her ; the old lady being shut up in her husband's room, where, after the doctor's arrival, Ellice had a natural delicacy about intruding. The one old servant, who knew of Margaret's flight, gave all the help that was required there, so that there was nothing for her to do, and the enforced silence and idleness, after the first terrible bustle, pressed so heavily on her that it was with an almost sick sensation of relief that she saw her cousin coming and went to meet him

at the door with the news that his breakfast was waiting for him, and old Martha said that the Squire had opened his eyes and moaned before falling into the sleep in which he was then lying. Ellice had put her hand—such a cold little hand—into Gordon's when she began to speak ; but though he did not let it drop, neither did he hold it comfortingly or stoop to kiss her, and only when she had done, said,

“ You say my breakfast is ready. Have you and Aunt Maggie had yours ? ”

“ Martha took her up a cup of tea. She would not have anything else, or let me go up to sit with the Squire while she got a little rest.”

“ And you ? have you rested ? ”

Ellice shook her head.

“ I could not, Gordon. How could I sleep, or eat either, when every one is so miserable and I can do nothing—nothing at all to help ? ”

“ It will certainly not help any one for you to make yourself ill,” said Gordon unsympathisingly ; “ and it is better to be useless than a trouble to other people. I shall be glad of my breakfast I know, and you had better have some with me. I should have been back an hour ago, only I waited for an answer to

my London telegram. As I thought, they had only taken tickets for there to throw us off the scent. Sit down without me, Lisa. I must go and tell my aunt about it."

But though his toast was buttered, and his coffee ready for him when he came down, Ellice had not touched anything, and, doubtful and suspicious as he felt about her, he could not help feeling touched by the wistful, pallid perplexity in her face, and he insisted on her pouring out another cup of coffee and drinking it before he even answered her inquiry as to how Mrs. Herne seemed and whether she, Ellice, might go to her.

"No," he said then, "you can do no good, and she would rather be alone. She could hardly leave her husband to speak to me. All she wants is her son's arrival."

"And you have telegraphed for him? Ah! I wonder how soon he can be here," cried Ellice, the colour rushing into her face at the thought of his coming and what it would be to her as well as his mother.

Gordon laid down his knife and fork and looked at her with that long, steady, inquiring gaze, which Margaret had once before found so trying.

"Ellice," he said coldly, "I am your adopted brother; so you must not be angry if I ask you now what Margaret Herne and the Squire meant by your 'love affair' and the concealment you have practised. My uncle seemed to think that I knew, that in fact you had told him that I knew all about it; whereas, as you know, you have never said a word to me of anything of the sort. Indeed I never thought, never dreamt, that a girl as young as you——"

"Could think about such things yourself," he was going on to say, when Ellice checked him. Her cheeks were crimson now and her eyes full of tears, not only from natural embarrassment at the confession she had to make, but at the remembrance of the Squire's wrathful and insulting words. That Gordon also should think ill of her was too terrible to be borne.

"Gordon, I do not know how they heard of it," she broke in stammeringly. "I never meant to conceal anything, only Robin asked me not to tell them till he came back and——"

"Tell them! *Is* there anything between you and him to tell, then? Surely, Lisa, you have not let him entangle you into a love affair without his parents' knowledge? Good

Heavens ! I had hoped you would deny it as indignantly as I did for you only last night, and now——”

“ Dear Gordon, if you would only listen to me !” Ellice pleaded as he pushed back his chair and began to pace the room with a furrowed, anxious brow. “ Don’t *you* know that I would not do anything insincere ? It was only yesterday that I knew it myself—that he loved me. I could not help it.”

“ Then he wrote to tell you so ? You could not help that, certainly ; but in that case it is all on his side, for you can’t have had time to answer him ; and therefore you are not engaged to him, or in any way compromised.”

“ Yes, for he did not write ; he came. *Querido*, if you would only stand still and not look at me in that way I will tell you all about it ;” and then Ellice did manage to tell her poor little tale ; though so nervously and brokenly that Gordon, in his stern integrity and utter ignorance of everything connected with love or girlhood, could make out little more than that she had met Robin yesterday unknown to the rest of the family, and had exchanged promises with him, holding her tongue about it afterwards, and meaning to do so till his return.

"It was only for three days," said poor Ellice, as she saw no signs of relenting in the severity of her young judge's brow; "and you know, Gordon, it was *his* place to tell his parents, not mine."

"No, I did not know," he answered rather sharply. Indeed, what did he know of such things? "and I can't tell you how vexed and grieved I am. Of course I know you did not mean to deceive them—did I not say so from the first? I felt convinced that that unfortunate girl was mistaken, and that you, *our Lisa*, would never have played so base a part; but Robin Herne's conduct is inexcusable, perfectly so."

"Gordon!" cried Ellice in dismay.

"Yes, Lisa, I am sorry to see that he has got such a hold on your liking; but I must speak the truth none the less. It was his duty to have spoken to his parents and ascertained their wishes before going to you at all."

"But, Gordon, men hardly ever do. It is not general; it——"

"Then it should be. Because the world is generally evil is no reason that one should approve of its evilness. It is not even as if you and he were independent people. He is

living on his father, and you are his father's guest and ward, placed here in trust as it were, and bound to look on his parents as your own. An honourable man would never have taken advantage of your position to make love to you, and run the risk of bringing your guardian's displeasure on you, and losing you a home."

"He thought they would like it, Gordon," said Ellice with sorrowful humility, "and . . . and so did I. They *seemed* fond of me."

"So they might be; and yet not wish to have you for a daughter-in-law. It was cowardly to place you in such a false position and then to go away. Indeed, how you can reconcile *that* with his professing to care for you——"

"He was obliged to go, dear. There was no later train."

"Then he should have thought of that when he made this appointment with you, and have written to excuse himself to his friends," Gordon retorted sharply; and Ellice had to remind him that there had been no appointment: her lover had met her by accident. Gordon looked incredulous. It certainly did seem strange that Robin, bound for Scar-

borough, should have left the station and walked down to that particular copse at Hardleigh End for no earthly object, unless he knew Ellice to be there, or perhaps had planned her going through his sister.

"I remember now," said Gordon, "how her anxiety for me to take you there struck me at the time. I did not understand it then."

"Perhaps she only wanted to get us out of the way," suggested Ellice, hitting on what was in truth Margaret's one idea. "I am sure Robin did not know I was there. He was as much surprised as—as I was. Indeed I do not think he would have said anything then but for . . . for finding me that way;" and Ellice flushed up scarlet again as she remembered how Robin *had* found her, crying her eyes out upon a grassy bank, and how speedily her grief had melted away in the close clasp of his tender arms.

Gordon sighed. To him the pretty love idyll was nothing more than a piece of mischief and truancy such as two of his Sunday-school children might have got into; and all the more painful that Lisa, his sister and ideal maiden, was involved in it; not culpably

as he believed, but so involved by that other evilly-disposed child, that he was obliged to sit as investigator and judge on both together.

"It is a very awkward affair," he said shortly, "particularly awkward as coupled with that poor girl's sinful imprudence, and her father's suspicions of your having connived at the latter to further your own ends."

"But you cannot think that the Squire really believed that!" cried Ellice, her slight figure drawn suddenly erect with wounded pride. "If he did but he *could* not, he was only in a passion but if he did, I—I—don't think I could stay here in his house."

"That is just what I was thinking," said Gordon slowly. "I am pretty sure that he does believe it; and the unfortunate accident of your having allowed his son to entrap you into a promise——"

"Gordon, *por Dios*, do not speak in that way of Robin! You do not understand, or you would not be so unjust to him."

"If I am unjust I will beg his pardon and retract what I have said. Still I cannot but think that if, instead of taking you by sur-

prise that way, he had tried openly to win you——”

“But I think he did try,” Ellice interrupted again, her cheeks glowing as she recalled the many little instances of Robin’s love for her which she had passed over at the time. “It was I who was stupid, not he who was uncandid; and then he thought I did not care for him and went away. I cannot think how Margaret knew about it, however, for she never said a word of it to me; and Gordon,” breaking off suddenly to lay her hand upon his arm, her eyes filling with the hurt feelings she was trying to repress, “surely *you* believe me?”

“Surely, yes,” he answered, meeting her look with one as comfortingly full and hearty as his tone. “I could as soon doubt my own word as yours, child, once you give it me. What grieves me is that it is not so with your guardians; and that you have managed by this entanglement to give a colour to their suspicions.”

“They suspected *you* too, dear.”

“True, and if it were not for the trouble that has fallen upon them I should have left the house at once; not from anger or resent-

ment (at least I hope not), but because if a man sits down tamely under imputed dishonour he in a way sets his seal to it. Lisa, what I have been thinking is that it should be so with a woman also."

"How? I don't know what you mean;" but she must have guessed, for her face paled suddenly.

"My uncle is in a most dangerous state, and will require his wife's constant attendance for a long while. You can be no use at present; and should their daughter be restored to them she will hardly care to have you, of whom she is evidently jealous, for a witness of her shame or penitence. *I* cannot stay here, of course. Indeed I have told my aunt I will go up to town to-day that I may find out the man's London address and do what I can towards tracing his proceedings, so that no time may be lost, pending young Herne's arrival. Dear Lisa,"—and now for the first time his face softened, and he took the poor little trembling hand from his arm and held it in his, half conscious as he did so that it was a wondrously long time since he had so taken and held a woman's hand, and that the soft clinging fingers had a different feel in

them after all to those of the Clerkenwell school children,—“don’t you think that under all these circumstances you would be better away?”

“*Away!*” repeated Ellice. The gentler tone and kind-hand clasp almost broke her down; but the idea suggested with it was so cruel, that her tears dried up in consternation.

“Yes, for a time at least, Lisa. I do not understand about love matters” (which was too true), “but I can’t help thinking that if only two days ago you would have been quite satisfied to know young Herne was engaged to some one else, and to devote yourself to taking care of me” (and he smiled slightly at the latter idea), “that your affection for him can hardly be as deep as you fancy; but even if it were, and if it were right and desirable that it should be so, I think, considering all that has passed and the suspicions cast upon you, that you can hardly stay in the house with a young man to whom you consider yourself engaged, without his parents’ approval of it.”

“But, Gordon, how could I disturb poor Aunt Maggie to talk of that sort of thing

now?" said Ellice, flushing up again at the very idea; "and he will explain it all directly he comes. Oh! why do you think that they would not approve?"

"I judge from their way of speaking, Ellice; but if they do they will send for you back again; and remember, even supposing that their son has every desire to be candid with them, his first thought at present must be his sister, and her alone. No man of any feeling could force his own affairs on his poor mother's attention when her husband is in such a state; and even you——"

"Oh, Gordon, Gordon, don't!" cried Ellice in a perfect agony. "I know you are right; and I would not marry him—no, not though I loved him with my whole heart, unless they wished it; but I can't—I *can't* leave them now when they are in such trouble. What would they think of me themselves? And besides, I have nowhere to go, unless Mrs. Calthorpe would take me in."

"I don't think that would be advisable for you, if Margaret's flight is to be kept secret; but as to that, I had a letter from your aunt-in-law, Mrs. Devereux, this morning, saying they are back in town, and want

you to pay them a visit. It is most opportune. Lisa, dear child, pray don't cry so. Of course I don't mean that you should leave here if you could be of use to the Hernes, or even if they wished you to stay ; but if, as from something aunt said I fancy, they would be glad to be alone, surely it would be more honourable and delicate not to wait for their son's return, knowing that your doing so might only cause them more pain and anxiety."

Ellice was weeping bitterly, with her face hidden against his arm, but she answered without hesitation :

"If I even thought *that* I would go away—anywhere, to-day."

"Then I will find out before I start and tell you." And gently disengaging himself Gordon got up and left the room.

I think it must be owned that Ellice was to be pitied. Not only had she been obliged to submit to be parted from her lover immediately after he had won from her that confession which so inevitably changes the whole tenor of a woman's life, and to sit with his parents knowing that her love for him and his for her was unknown to them, and ignorant of how it would be received, but she

had first been compelled to bury all thoughts of it and herself in the trouble of those around her; and then to drag it out as a criminal before a judge under the rigorous cross-examination of the man of all others whom she had most expected to rejoice in her happiness. Nay, more, she had now to let him dispose of her affairs and even of herself, though such disposal was wringing her heart, and would separate her at the most cruel of moments from him whom she loved and whom she so longed to comfort in the shame and sorrow which had fallen on him. And yet the poor child did submit, and with no thought of rebellion. Had not Gordon always been as a god to her, and how could she then resist his godhead the very first time that he chose to exercise it? more especially when he did so in the name of honour and delicacy, words of such immeasurable potency to the mind of a sensitive and pure-natured girl. How he would manage his mission to Mrs. Herne she did not know, or even inquire, though it was assuredly one requiring sufficient tact and *finesse* to daunt a skilled and sympathetic man of the world; and I may as well say here, what the reader will have already

divined, that his mode of conveying it, although perfectly straightforward, and free of such intention, did impress on Mrs. Herne that Ellice was as anxious to be gone as he to take her away.

"It is not that either of us resent the injustice which, on my honour, I assure you has been done her," he said. "Indeed, if Ellice can be of the smallest service to you she would like to stay; but I have thought that under the circumstances, and with your *son* coming"—he emphasised this so as to show Mrs. Herne their motive—"you would prefer her to be away for a little; and I know her aunt, Mrs. Devereux, would be glad to have her. Of course she could return to you at an hour's notice, if you wanted her."

And Mrs. Herne said, Oh yes, he could take her away. Most like Mrs. Devereux's house would be much pleasanter than theirs. Indeed the Croft were no place for pleasantness nor love-making now; and as to 'use,' the lass needn't stay for that. *She* could do all that was wanted for her old man wi' Martha to assist her, and they wanted none else. Besides, her boy would be coming next day, an' maybe if he found Margaret the poor

lass would be more minded to come home if she knew they were by themselves. All of which was said hurriedly outside the Squire's door, and with a sort of warmth and soreness at the idea of Ellice's eagerness to leave them, which poor, good Gordon was as far from understanding as a fly from reading the page of Sanscrit over which he walks. What did he know about women and their ways? All he took in was that Mrs. Herne wished his cousin to leave, and would not even retract what had been laid at the girl's door, for when he said to her,

"I hope, aunt, you don't really believe that Lisa could have encouraged or connived at your daughter's flight;" the harassed mother answered him much as she did Robin later, only more sharply. "What business had he, her nephew, and a lump of a sandy-haired lad, to go cracking up his sweetheart," she thought, "an' speaking of *her* child in a tone as though he were judge an' parson too; bothering her about nothing when she was wantin' to go back to the master!" Indeed it was only her haste to do the latter which prevented her saying as much in words, and as it was, the impatient hurry of her departure in one so

placid usually, made Gordon feel more strongly than before that he had been right in suggesting Ellice's departure.

But of all this the girl herself knew nothing. She had built her hopes on Mrs. Herne's affection for her, and wish to have her at her side in this time of trouble, and when on his return Gordon dashed these to the ground, her disappointment was so keen that it could only find vent in silent, sorrowful weeping—weeping which lasted long after he had started for London, promising to arrange with Mrs. Devereux, and return for her on the following day ; and which so exhausted her at length, that when old Martha entered the room to give her the doctor's report after his second visit, she found the poor child lying white and passive on the floor, with her head leaning against the sofa where she had been kneeling, and trembling in every limb as she sat up to inquire after the Squire.

The old man was conscious then, and had managed, partly by signs and partly by mumblings, to ask if Maggie were come back ; and on hearing no, to express his conviction that she wouldn't while the other little wench was there, and his satisfaction on hearing that the

latter was going away on a visit. Martha told Ellice this in blunt, though kindly, language, comforting the girl when she saw her lips quivering with silent pain, by speaking of it as a sick man's fancy, having rise in his daughter's silly jealousy of her new companion ; but it destroyed the last remnant of hope in Ellice's breast as to the chance of her being let stay ; and so it came to pass that it was she who, on the following evening, passed Robin, all unknowing, as he was strolling aimlessly along Trafalgar Square, and found herself shortly afterwards established in the house of people whom she had never seen, and only knew by name as her father's relatives.

CHAPTER II.

TAKING one thing with another, I don't think you could hit on a much pleasanter house in the West End than No. 3, Phillimore Gardens, Kensington ; or much more popular people than the hostess of that cheerful residence and her daughter.

Mr. Devereux, Ellice's uncle, had been an eminently taking and popular man, a physician greatly favoured by ladies, and achieving, as ladies' physicians of a certain class usually do, a very considerable income, and not inconsiderable reputation by his profession. Also, in which it may be further said that he was not wholly unlike others in his branch of the fraternity, he had married a patient with a comfortable little income of her own, some five or six hundred a year, which, though very properly settled on herself and her child, had formed a not-to-be-despised addi-

tion to the means of the then young and rising doctor. At the time of his death the latter was making something like twelve hundred pounds a year, and might have doubled that had he lived long enough; but fashionable physicians are seldom able to lay by much consistently with the outlay necessary for keeping up their positions. Mrs. Devereux was not economical; neither was the house in Phillimore Gardens held at a low rent or maintained in niggardly style; for all of which reasons it was found at the doctor's demise that he had left so little behind him that but for his widow's private income she might have been reduced to being really badly off. As it was, she and her daughter had nearly eight hundred pounds per annum between them, the doctor having fortunately been always too busy in inducting other people's families into the world to think of adding to his own; and it is a fact that two people, when they are both ladies and don't keep a carriage, can live very comfortably on eight hundred pounds a year. People did indeed say that Phillimore Gardens would have to be given up, and wonder (deploring it the while, for the Devereux's "Thursdays" were very plea-

sant institutions) to what new locality they would move ; but Lyle had discovered, as I have said, that by giving up the brougham they could go on very pleasantly where they were ; and so the name of Devereux still figured in the "Court Guide" against No. 3, and the "Thursdays," which had always been so charming, certainly lacked none of their agreeableness, although they had no longer even the occasional presence at them of the master of the house ; and although Mrs. Devereux, who had been a plump, pretty girl of the languid, soft-complexioned order, had degenerated into a fat, heavy woman, the soft complexion become pasty, and the languid sweetness mere lazy good temper.

It was Lyle indeed who was the true mistress of the house and manager of the "Thursdays," and perhaps a better would have been hard to find. At two and twenty, though looking old for her age from having been so long "out" and on view, she was one of the most charming of girls—charming to women and more especially charming to men, having inherited all her father's grace and suavity of manner, and part at least of her mother's beauty. Not that she had

been a pretty child ; or that she was exactly a pretty girl by nature ; but that having very tolerable materials she knew how to make the most of them, and the result was by no means to be despised. Her hair was dark and glossy, and if she had not very much of it she " did " it after a way which ladies with thin locks will understand without explanation, so as to lead you to an entirely opposite conclusion ; and though her eyes were not as large or brilliant as Margaret's, or liquid with the earnest sweetness which made Ellice's so lovely to some people's minds, they were dark like her hair, and she knew how to use them discreetly and make them laugh or soften in a manner which was very bewitching. Her complexion was her own and as good as her mother's had been, with a clear colour in the cheek, which among London girls she knew to be rare, and which was indeed her chief title to beauty ; and if her figure was less slight and lissom than Ellice's, it was more developed and set off by all the taste and skill which Paris corsets and exquisitely-fitting dresses could bring to aid in its perfection. But with all this it was not so much Lyle's appearance as her manner

which won her the host of admirers, who clustered round her in the ball-room, and made the five o'clock tea-table at No. 3, one of the best attended in Kensington. All that innocent brightness and readiness to adapt herself to others, which came to Ellice by nature, and had made her so quickly at home in the little Downshire village, belonged to Lyle also, with the difference that the brightness was more often piquante than innocent, and the interest and adaptability so much a matter of habit and practice, that any quality of nature in it had long since disappeared, it being called into requisition as readily for things and people the most distasteful as for the most agreeable to her.

Lyle was in fact one of those women who not only aim at making themselves all things to all men, but succeed. You took her into dinner never having seen her before ; and before the soup was off the table, or you had had time to notice the colour of her gown, she had found out your most special taste, or weakness, and was talking to it as if it were her own, with a zest and fervour which surprised you into delighted agreement with

every word she said. Or you were great on some particular subject, thinking yourself an authority on it, and somehow *that* subject, or a lane leading cunningly to it, was sure to crop up in Miss Devereux's conversation ; and she would ask you innocent questions about it, with an eager look in her dark eyes that insensibly drew you on to a disquisition which if delightful to no one but yourself, delighted you with your listener, and left you with an enhanced impression both of your own cleverness and her intelligence. Lyle could not draw at all ; nay, not even a pump or a three-legged stool with sufficient correctness to enable you to distinguish between the two ; yet there were few young women to whom artists cared so well to show their pictures, talking much afterwards of her delicious appreciation of colour and effect, and true artistic taste, just as musicians spoke of her correct ear and fine sense of harmony, whereas she could only play a few easy pieces learnt at school, and sometimes underwent real mental and bodily agonies in her efforts not only at keeping awake but at maintaining an air of intense pleasure while sitting through an interminable sonata in A by Haydn, or one

of Beethoven's still more interminable symphonies for the violin ; and as fox-hunters eulogised her as a downright jolly girl, up to anything, with no end of a seat on horse-back, when in truth she was a mortal coward and had never been in a saddle out of Rotten Row.

And all this at two-and-twenty ! No wonder Lyle looked older than she was ; though, thanks to her clear colour and natural trimness and vivacity, she was one of those women who would look younger at thirty ; and at forty would be infinitely more charming and popular than many girls of nineteen. She had had many admirers already and two or three offers, but as yet was disengaged ; not because she was not intending to marry, but because she knew the value of her own charms too well to marry otherwise than well, and was not inclined to sacrifice her independence and resign the pleasures of her maiden home one day sooner than she could help. In the meanwhile she liked to amuse herself, and as her chief amusement was to fill the house with agreeable people and fascinate every one about her, and as she took a great deal of trouble about it, I do not think that she should be

grudged her undoubted success, or that other women (married ladies with daughters and less fortunate spinsters) should have continually spoken of her as "that horribly designing, insincere girl Lyle Devereux." What design, for instance, could she have in making love to Mrs. Burt, the curate's wife, or Gordon Maxwell, the civil engineer's clerk? and yet she threw quite as much devotion into her discussion of the little Burts' garments and ailments, and of Mgr. Capel's last sermon, or the music at the Pro-Cathedral, as she did into her delight in young Lord Albany's blood-mare; or her sympathy with old Mrs. Moneybag's troubles about her five footmen.

It is some women's profession to charm, just as it is others' to teach or play; and I do not see that any one can be condemned for following their profession, more especially when all are pretty equally laborious.

It had been Lyle's idea to invite Ellice. She was quite alive to the fact, that however agreeable a house may be, there is nothing that "draws" people so well as an occasional novelty; and a young cousin fresh from the other side of the world, a half-Spaniard, playing the guitar and speaking English with a foreign

accent, would be a novelty more likely to be appreciated by the men at any rate than a new German *pianiste* or a costume *à la quinze siècle*. No. 3 had been let during the season to some inconvenient people who would only keep it till the end of August ; and as the Devereuxes had wintered pleasantly at Rome, spent their Easter in Paris and their summer at the sea-side, it was necessary for them to economise by coming home in September, horrible as that month cannot fail to be to people who are fond of society and like to see their friends' windows otherwise than plastered up with brown paper.

"But next month a good many people always come back," Lyle said resignedly, "and if we had her then, and liked her, she might stay till we go to the Burschenoffs' ; and it would be an excuse for a little gaiety, and be less risky than having her in the spring, when the more particular people are up. Besides, we haven't asked Gordon for ever so long."

And Mrs. Devereux agreeing (as she generally did to her daughter's suggestions), a pretty little note was written to young Maxwell, saying that they were back in town and wanted to know where he was, and if he would

not come to dinner ; also, when he had last heard from " the dear little stranger cousin," who Mrs. Devereux said reproachfully (though indeed it was Lyle who wrote the letter in her mother's name), ought not to be a stranger to them any longer ; and Gordon must tell the dear girl when he next wrote that they were longing to know her, and that she must—positively *must*—come and stay with them before long ; all of which would have been regarded by any man of the world, as it was by the writer herself, as only a vague preliminary to a possible invitation in the future. Gordon, however, took it literally as an earnest desire for Ellice's presence, and, rejoicing in its opportunity, horrified the Devereuxes beyond all words by telegraphing in answer that Ellice would be delighted to come to them *at once*. He was only in London for an hour or two, and was returning to Herncroft ; but would bring his cousin up from there on the following day, unless inconvenient to them, which he hoped it would not be ; and then he added, " Doctor advises it too."

Mrs. Devereux nearly had a fit on the spot.

"At once ? *to-morrow* ? Lyle, is that young man mad, or what does he mean ? Send

Dixon to the post-office at once to telegraph 'Impossible.' Why, she will be here if we don't make haste. Lyle, what are you thinking of? Only fancy if she came—and ill too!"

Lyle looked up with rather a thoughtful brow.

"It's just like Gordon Maxwell, mother; though I didn't think even he could construe my letter into a definite invitation; but, after all, I don't see why she shouldn't come, since she is so set on it. As to 'the doctor,' I dare say it's only that she wants change; and there is nothing to do but have the spare room got ready."

"But, my dear, in September, with every one away and nothing to do or see! She will be moped to death, and what shall we *do* with her?" remonstrated the mother.

Lyle laughed. She had a knack of taking things lightly.

"Well, mother, it will be her own fault; and as *I* am being moped to death at present she may serve to amuse me. Besides if she is delicate, and as eccentric as her forcing herself on us this way would seem, it would be really better to have her when we are quite by ourselves; and Gordon will have to

come and bring some of his men friends to amuse her."

"But, my love, what sort would they be? Do you remember what a cub he always was himself: really *too* dreadful. I didn't so much mind it when he was said to be going into the Church; but in society one expects people to act and dress decently."

"Yes, mamma, I know. He *was* an awful cub; though as I have always taken all the trouble of him, I don't think you ought to complain; and he's a cub now and dresses abominably; but for all that there's something striking in him, and people always ask who he is. He is so tall for one thing, and then he gets so desperately in earnest about some matters and is so absurdly naïve about others, that, mad as he is, he amuses me."

"Then, Lyle, would you let her come?"

"Well, yes, I think so, mother: only we must remember to be more careful of our words when we are dealing with aborigines in the future."

And so, instead of the telegram "Impossible," Gordon on his return to the Croft found a little note saying how charmed they would be to see Ellice; though, owing to

the time of the year and the *shortness of the notice*, they feared she would find London very dull and wretched. Of *course* (in a P.S.) there was nothing infectious in question ?

And Ellice knew nothing about it all. In her sorrow at leaving the Croft she had never even asked to see her aunt's letter, and took it for granted that it was a regular invitation. The faint hope that Robin might return before she left, and the fear that something might prevent her even saying good-bye to that aunt by adoption who had grown so infinitely dearer than any mere blood relation to her, and whom she had not seen since her departure was decided, took up all her mind to the exclusion of lesser things ; but Robin did not come ; and though she saw Mrs. Herne, it was only for a minute or two outside the Squire's door, which was left open lest he should move, and with a couple of servants within hearing of all that passed. Under these circumstances, and more especially as Ellice was supposed to be going to join Margaret at a friend's house on the doctor's recommendation that the house should be left absolutely quiet, it was of course impossible to say a word of a private nature ; though if

Mrs. Herne had not been so desperately anxious to return to her husband's bedside she might have read somewhat in the tight clasp of the girl's arms and the tears which rolled down her face as Ellice whispered (for they might not speak aloud) a timid entreaty that Mrs. Herne would write and tell her if there was any good news, and how the Squire was ; also that if Mrs. Herne changed her mind and wanted her, or thought she could be of use, would she send for her back ? She might be quite sure that she, Ellice, would never do anything against her wish, all she wanted was to be a help to them ; much of which was rendered nearly unintelligible to Mrs. Herne by the fact that the latter was listening all the while for the least sound from the inner room, and still more so by Gordon's saying *his* farewells at the same time, and assuring his aunt (which was after all more interesting to her) that he would continue to make every effort to trace out Margaret's whereabouts and telegraph results to Robin : after which he hurried Ellice away lest they should be too late for the train.

Five minutes later she was at his side being driven rapidly to the station, and trying

with turned head and streaming eyes to see the very last of the old house, which had been so pleasant a home to her, as long as even a chimney of it remained in sight.

It was not four months since it had first come into her view ; and then it was the end of May, and she was sitting at Robin's side feeling very shy and nervous as they drove through narrow lanes under the exquisite verdure of the arching trees, and past fields where the wheat was still green and hedgerows fragrant with sweet white-thorn and gay with wild roses and honeysuckle. Now, it was September, and though the golden harvest still lingered in some of the fields, others were already brown and bare and echoing to the "bang, bang" of ardent sportsmen, while the hedge maple and guelder-rose had put on their gold and crimson raiment, and the ruby-coloured berries of the wild rose glistened like living jewels through the sheltering green. The summer was coming to an end, and with it all the happiness of the home which had given her so kindly a welcome a few short months ago ; and as Ellice leant back in the railway carriage, trying through her tears to see the last of the pleasant homely

country, her thoughts went back to him who had come, a stranger, to meet her at Southampton and bring her to his home, and she almost forgot the man at her side who had been the idol of her life, and for whom *then* she had been longing with such wistful loneliness.

Gordon did not attempt to comfort her for some time. His thoughts were turned almost exclusively on Margaret, on the iniquity of the man who could lead a young girl to desert her family in so imprudent and heartless a manner; and the terribleness of the punishment which would fall on her when she learnt the state to which her flight had reduced her old father: more than all, on the best means of finding her out: and of persuading her husband (if husband he was by this time) to let her return home, for a while at any rate, until the Squire was better and the scandal of her elopement getting wind averted. And suppose the man had deceived her! Suppose they were not married, or that he had a wife already! Ignorant as Gordor was of the world in some ways, he could not, living in this present age, and with all the daily papers round him, be ignorant that such things not only might be but were; and as the image

of Margaret's passionate mouth and the almost wild gleam in her eyes rose before him, he shuddered to think of what might be the result of her finding herself duped, and cast about in his mind as to what could be done for her if she should positively refuse to return to her home.

"If she were only a Catholic, I know a convent that would receive her," he thought; "and where the sisters could calm and bring her back to repentance better than Aunt Margaret, with her fussiness and absorption in her home and husband. I wonder whether young Herne will get my second telegram and follow them to France before going home." And then his eyes fell on a great crystal drop which had just rolled down Ellice's cheek and was lying on the lap of her black dress, and he said kindly :

"Do not cry any more, Lisa; you will make yourself ill, and can't help her. Besides, I have no doubt her brother is now arriving at his home, if he has not already gone on her track; and as I shall keep a sharp look-out for them in London, I have good hopes of her recovery. *You* can aid her by praying that it may be to repentance, poor, wilful girl!"

Ellice started and looked at him with half-puzzled eyes. Margaret's part in the calamity had to her simply taken the form of a runaway marriage, a thing she had often read of in books, but from which the couple generally returned to be pardoned, after occasioning as much misery to every one else as possible; and her own mind had at the moment been absorbed in recalling the kindness of her welcome from Mrs. Herne on that evening in May four months ago, and regretting that she had not left a note behind her for Robin to explain her departure. She had wanted to do so as a matter of course, but on her saying something about it to Gordon he had seemed so surprised, and so confident, that Mrs. Herne, and even the servants, might misinterpret the action, that Ellice, shrinking sensitively from doing anything to add to the bad impression against her, had given up the idea. Robin would be sure to miss her at once, and then his mother must tell him why she was not there. But suppose he was too hurt and angry to ask, what would he—what could he think of her then? And even to leave the explanation to another person was very hard, and must seem cruel in the extreme to him.

"I was not thinking of Margaret just then," she said, blushing very much at the consciousness of how selfish the cause of her anxiety seemed to her cousin, and Gordon repeated in a tone of surprise :

"Not thinking of Margaret ! I fancied you were grieving over her sinful imprudence, and the trouble it has brought on her home. You have been friends together, and she is so near your own age, that I thought your mind was even more likely to be with her than her poor father."

"I was thinking of—Robin just then," said Ellice, blushing yet more guiltily as she owned it. "It will be so dreadful for him, and when he sees I am not there and does not know why—Gordon, I wish I might have written to him. Surely it would not have been wrong."

And then Gordon looked almost angry. The young man was indeed more shocked at the levity and selfishness which could dwell on so trifling a matter at such a moment than appreciative of the girl's childish candour ; and I'm afraid that for the moment he wished devoutly that Ellice also were a Catholic, that he might dispose of her in

another convent. *Where* else were women safe from this dangerous folly of love and being made love to ?

It wanted a few minutes to half-past seven when they reached Phillimore Gardens, and Lyle met them at the door, looking very pretty in her graceful dinner dress. Ellice had dried her tears long before, but the traces of them were only too visible in her heavy eyes and white face, and I think the elder Miss Devereux deserved great credit for not allowing one shade of the intense anxiety she felt on the subject of her guest's woebegone appearance to be visible through the caressing warmth of her greeting.

"So sweet of you to come to us in this *unexpected* way," she said, not unwishful to give her self-invited guest a gentle hit for her want of ceremony ; "and we have heard so much of you too from Gordon here. Mamma and I feel as if we had known you all our lives. Gordon, I haven't said a word to you yet, but you must expect to be a little put aside for your 'Lisa' just at first, and we will talk to you at dinner."

But Gordon made it immediately apparent that he was not going to stay to dinner. He

had only come to leave Ellice, and then he had business to do. It was the Hernes' business, of course, and he had been travelling all day, and wanted his dinner more than anybody, but he did not say that; and Ellice's whispered persuasions for him not to go till after he had dined were as unheeded as Lyle's merry teasing as to the destination of a bunch of wild flowers which he carried carefully wrapped up in two or three large leaves.

"Evidently there is some other young lady in question," the latter said gaily, though a trifle piqued withal. "Dinner is a prosaic thing in comparison, and perhaps *she* will give him some. Who is she, Cousin Lisa? do you know?"

"They are for a sick Irish boy," said Ellice simply, and too sad at heart to smile. "Gordon is very fond of him, and promised to bring him some flowers from the country; but he had no time to get any before leaving, so when we stopped at a little country station to change to the main line, he ran across to some fields and got these while I was having some refreshment."

"And he told you they were for an Irish boy! You *are* an innocent little thing," Lyle

said, laughing and kissing her; but the laugh was not visible a few minutes later, when she ran into the room where Mrs. Devereux was dressing for dinner, and, after describing the arrival to her, said :

“I do call it too bad of Gordon to take himself off and saddle us with her the very first evening. And, mamma, I can't help thinking she has been *sent* away from that place for something. Her eyes are as red as if she had been crying all day, and when I asked her if they hadn't been very unwilling to let her go she stammered, and the tears came into them again. By the way, isn't there a grown-up son in the family ?”

CHAPTER III.

IF Lyle hoped to find out anything as to the correctness of her surmise that first evening, however, she was mistaken. Gordon had said to Ellice :

“If Robin Herne really cares for you he will write to you as soon as he finds that you are gone and his mother tells him the reason. You may be quite sure of that.”

And so, with a firm trust in the arrival of that letter, and an equally firm resolution of keeping Margaret's trouble and her own from strangers' ken, Ellice managed to come down to dinner looking, by the aid of dress and cold water, very different to what she had done on her first arrival. Pale and grave she was certainly ; but the former was accounted for by Gordon's previous reference to “the doctor,” while the latter passed muster as the

natural shyness of a young girl newly thrown among strangers ; and the sweetness in her voice and eyes made amends for it, and won greatly on Mrs. Devereux during the first evening.

"I could almost think it was your poor papa speaking. The brothers were greatly alike," she said to Lyle ; while Ellice's simple explanation of her coming, by a reference to their "kind letter of invitation," which Gordon had conveyed to her, and the sudden and dangerous illness of her guardian, almost baffled that young lady's easily roused curiosity.

"I suppose as he has a wife and daughter you were not wanted to help in the nursing," she said ; and Ellice answered very quietly,

"No ;" adding after a moment, "I wanted to stay and help ; but Mrs. Herne and the doctor said he would be better if the house were left perfectly quiet."

"Though I should not think you were very noisy, Cousin Lisa, even with young Mr. and Miss Herne to help you," said Lyle gaily.

And Ellice again answered with that quiet, "No."

There was not much to be got out of her the first night.

But the following day was harder to go through ; for there was no letter from Robin or any one. Gordon did not come to see her till the evening ; and kind and charming as Lyle made herself, her very sweetness rendered Ellice's reserve a more difficult thing to maintain. She was glad when Lyle proposed to take her to the Exhibition of Water-colours in Suffolk Street, because looking at pictures must stem the tide of talking about herself ; though at the same time her anxiety for a letter would have made her elect to stay indoors if she could, lest one should come while she was out. On this point she had determined to be patient, knowing that if the runaways had gone to the Continent, as Gordon suspected, Robin might not, in the hurry of following them, have had time to write to her ; and though her heart was torn by doubts and anxieties, she managed to keep them well under cover, and walked from room to room at Lyle's side, listening to the latter's remarks, and looking at or admiring the pictures, according as they struck her uneducated eye, with as much readiness as though she had nothing else on her mind.

I don't think that her admiration was very

discriminating. She had hardly ever seen a picture in her life before, South America being a *terra incognita* so far as art is concerned ; and a few blackened oil-paintings of religious subjects and her mother's simple water-colour sketches being all she knew of the "art divine ;" besides which, her mind was not sufficiently absorbed in the matter to enable her to detect faults or beauties which did not readily attract the eye ; so that, on the whole, this collection of the works of modern painters, mediocre as autumn exhibitions are wont to be, filled her with awe and admiration, and a great sense of her own ignorance and all she had yet to learn. Still she said what she thought about each simply and honestly, and Lyle agreed, or *seemed* to agree, with her so completely that she felt as if she must know more about it than she thought after all. It was well she did not hear her cousin's after-comments :

"My dear mother, it really would have amused you : only I was so afraid of other people hearing her and thinking we were a pair. Fancy her passing by a tiny bit of Tadema's without even looking at it : the only thing worth having in the gallery, and going

into raptures over a pink baby with mauve shadows struggling out of its mother's arms in a sort of strawberry-cream sunset effect. I had to insist on stopping a minute for the Tadema; not that I cared about it, but I knew young Elmslie and Haller were coming here to-morrow, and that I must say I have seen it; and she asked me, 'Why do all the people crowd here so, cousin? Surely not to look at that little picture! Why, it is nothing but three marble steps and a mulatto girl. It is not pretty at all, and there is no *story* in it.' Oh! I should have liked Mr. Haller to hear her; and she is such a child too. The tears really came into her eyes when she was standing before a horrid daub of Lear cursing Cordelia; and she grew pale—quite pale, as she stared at a stupid unfinished sketch of a gipsy by Nino Gerrant. I had to touch her arm and show her I was moving on; or I expect she would have burst out into wild admiration."

Lyle was wrong. She was a keen observer of the outer face of human nature; but the heart lay too deep for her, and she could not see into it. There was no fear of Ellice breaking out into admiration of Gerrant's

sketch. It was its likeness to Margaret—being indeed done from her—which had attracted the girl's attention, and made the colour fade from her cheek : but she said nothing ; she took it for a coincidence, and never even thought of asking the artist's name when Lyle's touch recalled her to herself, so that the latter could make no guess as to what was in her mind ; while it was not the beauty of Cordelia or the somewhat theatrical colouring of the picture which had affected her, but something in the grey, ruffled hair and wrathful eyes of Lear which reminded her of the poor old Squire ; and Lyle was both amused and embarrassed when later in the day her cousin said to her :

“I am so glad, Lyle, that we like the same pictures. I was afraid, as I had never seen any before and knew nothing about them, that you would have picked out quite different things to me. But perhaps you are not much of an artist either ? I expect the two who you say are coming to-morrow will think quite differently to what we do.”

Lyle was not sure that she liked that ‘*we*.’

Gordon came also on the morrow ; but he had nothing to tell her, save that Gerrant

and Margaret had been traced to France; and when Lyle saw him speaking in an undertone to Ellice she came up and took him away, saying gaily that he must not monopolise his cousin all the evening. Mr. Elmslie wanted to be introduced to her, and he must go and talk to mamma.

"Miss Devereux will be able to tell you what she thinks of the water-colours. We were there yesterday," she said to young Elmslie, with a half smile, suggestive of a hint she had given him that she had some aborigines staying with her who would give him some fun. But, as it happened, the artist had been greatly taken by Ellice's fair pale face and willowy figure. "*What an 'Elaine' she would make!*" he said to himself; and the gentle look in her liquid grey eyes as she turned to him on Lyle's challenge and said very frankly:

"I cannot tell you what I think about pictures, because I never saw any in my life before. One must get familiar with a thing before one knows what to *think* about it," fairly captivated him; and he answered warmly:

"Ah! if only some London young ladies

were like you : girls know as little about art as if they had never seen it, and yet jabber the jargon of it till one is sickened by the repetition of the eternal self-same phrases. Yet I should think *you* cared about pictures."

"Yes," she said quickly, and with a sudden warmth in her eyes, "I do. I did not know how much till yesterday ; but I hope I should care more understandingly if I knew more of them. Can you remember your first play ? I can mine. It was a little Spanish *comedi-etta*, and I thought it more bewilderingly beautiful than a dream, I was so happy. Six years later I saw it again, and it seemed to me very poor, silly, and extravagant ; but all the same I am glad to have *had* the happiness earlier—glad that the beauty of the dream was not brushed off for me then."

"If I could hope that six years hence I should be talking to you of your first visit to a picture-gallery, *I* should feel happy," young Elmslie said.

He was quite in love with her, and thanked Lyle warmly for the introduction ; but Ellice was wholly unconscious, and was thinking of Gordon, to whom she did not get another

chance of speaking in private. She thought she might have done so if he had cared to manage it; but he did not seem to try, and went away at last without another word to her on the subject which occupied her heart. He had not even mentioned Robin's name.

Poor Ellice! she tried very hard to believe that her lover was too much occupied by the search for his sister to be able to think of her; and told herself many times that it was quite right it should be so, and very wrong and selfish of her to even wish that he should act otherwise. Her faith in him was greater than his in her; and if she had only heard from his mother or any one at Herncroft, she would have been content to wait patiently till he had done his duty to his family and taken her news of him second hand; but though she had written to Mrs. Herne she had received no answer; and even Gordon noticed the extreme pallor of her face, when, a day or two later, he came again to see her.

"London does not agree with you," he said; "or have you been keeping late hours? I have always thought the life Lyle Devereux leads is a most unhealthy one, with neither useful occupation nor real happiness in it. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Not very much," replied Ellice. "We breakfast quite late, you know, and then there is shopping and lunch and the paper and new books to look at, and yesterday we dined out. Lyle says town is empty, but," with a weary little sigh, "it seems *crowdedly* full to me. One cannot breathe easily for knowing the numbers and numbers of people who are crushed together and opening their mouths to get that breath of air as well; but, Gordon," checking him as he was about to say something about the crowding in the East End, and speaking in a lower, more eager tone, "have you *nothing* to tell me from home, or of her? I am so anxious to hear."

Gordon frowned slightly.

"Yes, I have heard of her. They were in Paris. There is nothing good to tell you, Lisa. Indeed, I think the subject is one you had better not think about. Pray for her if you like, and for her parents. I am very sorry for them."

He was turning away as if to show that he considered the matter done with so far as Ellice was concerned; but the girl was not to be put aside so summarily. Her face, a moment back so pale, was flushed indeed now

to a deep, painful tint ; but her eyes met his firmly and unshrinkingly as she said :

“ Gordon, I cannot *help* thinking of Margaret. You forget that we have lived together and that she is—” her voice faltered here, but she went on bravely—“ Robin’s sister. How can I not want to hear about her when I know what trouble her running away has brought on her and her parents ? And I have heard nothing—nothing at all—from any of them. Won’t you tell me all you can, at least ?”

“ Then you have not heard from Robin Herne ?” said Gordon, looking at her keenly. “ I thought he would have written to you.”

The colour deepened still more in Ellice’s face, and her lips trembled. Had *she* not thought so too, and with good right ? It was the only answer she made for a minute ; and then she said, almost in a whisper :

“ Have *you*, Gordon ?”

“ Yes ; I have had two telegrams from him and one note. The last was to-day. He is in Paris, and his message was to let me know that Nino Gerrant left France yesterday for London. I went to the man’s lodgings at once, and heard that he had arrived last night.”

"And—and Margaret?" said Ellice breathlessly.

"She was not with him; but he had given notice to leave immediately on arriving, and had been packing all the morning. He was out when I went there; but he may be going to join her somewhere."

"Unless—do you not think, Gordon, that she may be with Robin? You say they have been in Paris together and——"

Again Gordon interrupted her with a frown.

"My dear Lisa, you are getting quite pale again with excitement. Do not talk about her any more. Wherever she may be, child, I fear it will never be fit for *you* to meet her again; and I am only sorry you should have been thrown as much with her and her brother as you have been. If it hasn't done you any harm as yet, I am sure it can't have done you good."

"*Querido*, pray don't speak so. Do you forget that Margaret is dear Aunt Maggie's only daughter? I am sure it has done me good to be with them; and as to Robin, if you only knew him——"

"I know this, Lisa, that the way in which he has behaved to you proves to me that his

principles must be little better than his sister's. Indeed, I wonder that you do not feel——”

“And how do you know I do not?” cried Ellice, her eyes filling with sudden, uncontrollable tears; “but I *cannot* judge him as you do. I believe in him, and I believe that he trusts me to do so, and to understand that his duty is to look for Margaret now. He may not even know where I am; and—and I can wait.”

“Cousin Gordon, surely you and Ellice are not quarrelling!” said Lyle, coming up to them with that sweet smile which made her face so attractive. “You look—oh! you don't know how stern you look; and Ellice, as if you had been making her cry. Why, I thought only lovers quarrelled, and really——”

“But I am not quarrelling with Gordon, Lyle,” said Ellice, conscious that her eyes were wet, and trying to smile, though she could not help feeling vexed at the interruption. “We were only talking about his relations, with whom I have been staying. You know they were in great trouble when I left them.”

“Ah! and is it not strange, then, that you have not heard from them since?” said Lyle

readily. "You must be so anxious for news of old Mr. Herne. Indeed, I thought you would have been followed by cart-loads of letters, but she has not had one, Gordon, not a single one!"

"There is no one to write but my aunt," said Gordon coolly, while Ellice blushed so red that Lyle was confirmed in her suspicions that there was more behind the scenes than she had been told of. "And of course she is very busy. My two cousins were both away when their father was taken ill."

"And do you mean they *stayed* away? How very strange! I wonder their mother did not send for them, or that she spared you too, Ellice. Surely she must have wanted help!"

"If she did she could have had it. I imagine that she is the best judge of that," Gordon answered in what Lyle inwardly styled his "bear's manner," while Ellice murmured something of the son and daughter being in France. The young lady's questioning was very embarrassing to both, but fortunately, she saw as much herself, and thinking she had gone far enough for the present, changed the conversation into pleasanter channels with

her usual easy tact. Afterwards she carried off Gordon, and talked theology to him in the spirit of an earnest but child-like inquirer after truth, till she not only sent him away in a good humour with himself, but with a higher opinion of her than he had ever before entertained.

He had never taken much interest in Lyle previously, but this evening he began to think that there was more depth in her than he had given her credit for. She had spoken as if she was not really happy in the idle, worldly life she led, but thirsting for one of fuller faith, and greater sacrifice and devotion ; and he found himself talking out of his heart to her with kindling eyes and rising colour, and half feeling as if Ellice were to blame for not joining in the conversation, but sitting out of earshot of them, winding some wool with listless fingers, which often dropped on her lap for minutes together. It is true he never talked of his own religion to her. He had given a solemn promise to her mother that he never would, or in any way use his influence over her in that direction ; and, as we once heard him say, a promise was a sacred thing with Gordon Maxwell. But her moral wel-

fare was a very different matter, and one which he considered as specially under his charge. Had she not always appealed to him for guidance even in the most trivial matters? and now that a serious difficulty had arisen, one which he honestly believed most dangerous to her and likely to imperil her happiness for life, she showed, if not a disposition to rebel against his counsels, one which was certainly disinclined to accept them as final and conclusive; and with this, a far more dangerous inclination to submit to the influence of a person against whom he felt as much anger as he had ever indulged against another man. In his opinion Robin Herne had trifled, both wantonly and culpably, with the affections of his adopted sister; and Gordon's love for her made him resent such conduct the more bitterly since he believed that, but for his opportune presence, Ellice might possibly have been led into the very deceit and ingratitude against her guardians of which they believed her guilty.

"I'm glad I took her away," he said to himself, as he walked home that night. "I suppose he would say he had only been flirting with her, but she evidently believes that

he was in earnest, and I will not have the child flirted with. I am not sure that it has not done her mind harm as it is. An innocent young girl as she is ought never to hear of such things as her unfortunate cousin's story seems likely to turn out. It should have been sufficient to her to know that Robin Herne and I were doing our best to find the poor girl and restore her to her parents. 'Unspotted from the world,' that is what I have always hoped to keep Lisa; but how is it to be done if she is to listen to young Herne's love-making, or live in an atmosphere like the Devereux's?" And then he bethought himself that he had heard Father Bertram speak of a cousin of his, an Anglican lady, who had established a *crèche* for poor children, and was in want of help in their management. "That would be wholesome work for her," he thought; "and she can't stay at the Devereux's for ever. I will ask him about it."

He was at the door of the clergy-house by now, and on ringing at the bell was told by the porter, a lame Irishman, that a gentleman had called to see him, and was waiting in the parlour.

“A gentleman!” Gordon repeated in surprise. He was so unused to visitors of his own class that the news, in conjunction with the lateness of the hour, startled him a little; but he walked straight upstairs without waiting to inquire or wonder who it might be, and turned into the little parlour on the first floor. It was a small, square room, with grey walls, hung with two or three engravings from sacred pictures, and a huge crucifix over the mantelpiece; the two windows filled with pots of geraniums and mignonette; the floor painted brown and polished; a big bookcase at one end, filled with books, and for the rest of the furniture a table, a horsehair sofa, and half-a-dozen chairs. On one of these latter the visitor was seated, a young man about his own age, but dark-haired and bright-eyed, and with a pleasant, frank expression, which was evidently only temporarily clouded by the look of worry and anxiety which sat strangely on it at present. Gordon had never seen him before, but there was something in his face which instantly recalled to him both his own father and Mrs. Herne’s kindly features as she lifted up her face to kiss him in the pleasant, old-fashioned parlour at the

Croft, and he was about to put the thought and its sequence into words, when the young man forestalled him by saying :

" You are my cousin Maxwell, I suppose ? I am Robert Herne, and I only arrived from Paris this afternoon." He held out his hand as he spoke—a smaller, more delicate hand than Gordon's—and the latter took it ; but the clasp was not warm on either side, and after young Maxwell had asked him to be seated, he said :

" You came to me, I suppose, to know if I have any news for you. I went to the man's lodgings as soon as I got your telegram, and found he had arrived, but was out. He is leaving again, however, almost immediately."

" Then I must nail him to a meeting without delay. Will you go with me ? This is the first day my damaged head has let me get about, and travelling has made it muzzly."

" Certainly, or without you, if you think it better. I suppose that you know he is alone ?"

" I know that he left France alone. Then—she—is not here ?" said Robin, with a little catch in his breath at the mention of his sister which moved Gordon's pity. Certainly if the young fellow had not been so Bond-

Street-like in his dress and appearance, he would not have had much of the air of an evil-minded Lothario. Gordon spoke more cordially than he had done before.

"No, and therefore I have hopes that she left him as soon as she found out his real character."

"Do you think so? I hope to God you're right!" cried Robin, his face flushing. "I could find no trace of her in Paris, or of her having been there at all."

"You are sure that she has not seen the advertisement and gone home?"

"Yes, I had a line from my mother this morning. The poor old governor is just the same. There is no news there." Robin's voice had grown suddenly husky, and Gordon felt his heart softening to him more and more.

"What can I do for you?" he said abruptly. "We are cousins. You can use me as you could not a friend in a case like this. Please do."

"Thank you," said Robin simply. He too felt the kindlier influence of the straightforward fellowship Gordon seemed anxious to show him, and forgot for the first time that

this big-boned, fair young man was his rival in Ellice's love, the Galahad of her imagination. "You can guess what I mean to do. Call that fellow out, and if he cannot or will not clear my sister's name, shoot him like a dog. I can't ask a friend to stand by me for fear of the real reason getting wind. Will you do so?"

It flashed across Gordon's mind what Father Bertram would have thought had he guessed that such a proposal was being made in his own clerical parlour to his own favourite boarder and pupil; and of the words of horror and reprobation in which alone he could have imagined its being answered. Autocrat as the young man liked to be with his little cousin, he had always been as docile as a child with the good priest of St. Ethelberta's-in-the-Slums—asking his advice and carrying out his precepts with the readiness and simplicity of an affectionate son. How it happened, therefore, that immediately, on that flash of conscience he found himself answering :

"With great pleasure, and the sooner the better," it is impossible for me to tell ; but that he did so is very certain ; and also

that when Robin added with feverish hurry :

"It is barely eleven. Is it too late for you to take him my message to-night?" that he answered in the negative, and took up his hat with equal alacrity and good-will. The young men went out together and called a hansom ; and on the way Gordon said :

"I hope you were not waiting long for me?"

"Only half-an-hour. The servant told me you were always in at ten."

"So I am generally, but I was spending the evening with the Devereuxs—cousins, and could not get away."

"Oh !" said Robin. He had grown suddenly pale and spoke shortly, feeling like a man in whose face a glass of cold water has been suddenly dashed ; while Gordon on his side felt ready to bite his lips with vexation at having mentioned his cousin's name. A moment back he had been ready and eager to befriend his companion, looking on him as a man rightfully bent on avenging a wrong done to his sister, even as he would have done in a similar case. Now, it recurred to him that this young fellow he was assisting

had in truth been equally guilty in wronging Ellice, though to a less degree, and was equally deserving of reprobation for the way in which he had trifled with her affections, and then left her to suffer injustice and censure from his parents without a word of excuse or explanation. Gordon's brow grew dark at the recollection, and he drew rather away from his kinsman, staring out of the hansom with angry eyes, and wondering in his ignorance whether most of the young men about town (those outside Father Bertram's fold *bien entendu*!) were of the same breed as this Herne and Gerrant, and if so, how they could find the face to rise up in condemnation of each other. He could not draw back from his offers of assistance; but he felt in his heart that he had rather they had been made to any other man; while Robin on his side was struggling hard with the jealousy and mortification which prompted him to go his way alone and fight his sister's battles by himself, rather than accept the aid of the man who, whether as a lover or otherwise, had taken his darling away from him; and who had but just returned from spending the evening in her sweet society.

He would have given worlds to ask about her, how she was, and where she was, and a thousand other questions which had been in his heart for days back ; but till he knew in what capacity Gordon stood to her he could not utter one of them ; and as nothing was further from the latter's mind than to touch on the subject at all, the two men, a moment back almost brother-like in their joint errand, sat on stiff and frozen in a silence which grew more constrained every moment ; and were thankful when the cab came to a stand-still, and they were able to spring out at Gerrant's door.

"You had better wait for me outside. I shall not be long," said Gordon shortly ; and Robin only nodded. He wanted so much to say that on second thoughts he would rather dispense with his cousin's services altogether, that he could say nothing at all ; and having dismissed the hansom, paced moodily to and fro the pavement, wondering bitterly if Ellice had never spoken of him to his rival ; and if so whether the latter must not think him very mean-spirited to come to him for aid in his trouble, till on turning he saw that Gordon had come out of the house, and was walking

quickly to meet him. His first uttered words changed the current of Robin's ideas.

"He is not there, Herne. He came back with a cab shortly after my call this afternoon, and left with all his possessions."

"*Left!* For where?" cried Robin, standing still in his dismay and looking very blank.

"He wouldn't say; but the cabman had orders to drive to Charing Cross. My belief is, that when he heard he had been inquired after, he became anxious to get out of the way and keep his skin whole."

"By —, the fellow is the most cowardly hound I ever heard of! But he shan't escape so. I'll follow him up—confound him!—wherever he is. See if I don't!" Robin cried out between his teeth. Gordon looked at him full.

"Men cowardly enough to deceive women are not likely to be brave with their fellow men," he said bitterly. "Well, I don't see that I can be of any further use to you to-night. When I can, you know where to find me."

"Thank you, yes," said Robin. The same offer and the same answer as those made

earlier in the evening ; but spoken now in a colder and very different spirit ; and followed by a formal "good-night."

The young men parted without another word.

"And when Ellice knows that he never so much as named or asked after her, I do believe her own sense must tell her that she has deceived herself, and enable her to put him out of her mind for good and all," Gordon said to himself, as he hailed an omnibus going east, and clambered up to a seat on the roof.

CHAPTER IV.

THE days that followed this were some of the least pleasant for Ellice to look back upon in after times. That terrible heart-sickness of a hope deferred was beginning to tell on her, and to rob her of her natural brightness and vivacity to a far greater extent than she was at all aware of. It was a damp, muggy autumn too, and London air pressed heavily on her unaccustomed lungs, and robbed her cheek of colour and her step of elasticity. Mrs. Devereux said that the girl looked dreadfully wishy-washy, and ought to see a doctor. If she were going into a decline the Hernes had no right to send her up to them; and she ought to be returned to them at once before she got worse. Lyle declared she had something on her mind, and did her best to find it out; but both were baffled, for Ellice

declared that she was quite well, and did not want a doctor, while her resolution to guard Margaret's secret made her impervious to all hints and questionings on the subject. But the close rooms and formal visits where she knew no one and no one spoke to her, the want of country walks and home occupation, all added to that greatest weariness of all, waiting for news which never came, starting at each ring at the bell, watching for each postman's knock, going out with the thought, "Will he come or write while I am away?" and coming back to find the thought vain, and neither line nor message for her: all of which combined was making her quite a different girl to the sunny-faced little maiden who had won all hearts in that out-of-the-way Downshire village.

She had heard from the Croft at last; not, indeed, from Mrs. Herne, but from the old servant who alone was in the secret of Margaret's flight; and from her she learnt that the master still kept his bed and seemed to get no better. Missis's time was completely taken up with watching him, and her hair was grown quite grey. There was no word from Miss Margaret yet, nor they didn't know where she was; and Mr. Robin was in London,

as she supposed "Miss Devrooks" knew. They all missed Miss Devrooks dreadful, Martha said. Mrs. Calthorpe had said twice she'd never had any one so useful in the Sunday-school, and she didn't understand the two young ladies staying away so long. Indeed Mrs. Calthorpe was dreadful aggravating with her questions; and Martha herself would be real glad if Ellice were back, if only to find answers to her and amuse the Squire. The doctor was always saying he wanted rousing; but missis was too downhearted and used to giving in to him to do it; though indeed, the good woman added, she was afraid she had taken a liberty in saying so, for missis had told her that Miss Devrooks was enjoying of herself immensely with her new relatives; and for her part she hoped she'd go on doing so, for there was little enough enjoyment at the Croft nowadays, and any young lady had like to be moped to death there: all of which, kindly as it was, cut Ellice to the quick with a pain which was intensified by a message from Mrs. Herne at the end. The old lady sent her love, and had no time to write herself or she would have answered Ellice's letter. She was glad to

hear the latter liked her kinsfolk, and hoped she would pay them a long visit. Nephew Gordon had written her how kind they were; and indeed London town must be much gayer and pleasanter for a lass like Ellice than their dull home.

Ellice answered this by saying how much dearer the dull home was to her, and how willingly, *willingly* she would return to it if Mrs. Herne wished for her; but she got no answer to this, and though neither she nor the old lady mentioned Robin's name, she fancied that the latter would understand her waiting for permission to return as referring to him, and took the subsequent silence for a further veto on the love which he had once told her would be so cordially sanctioned.

The greatest blow to her was to learn that he, too, was in London, breathing the same air, perhaps passing her in the streets, and yet never seeking her out or writing her a line to say what kept him away. Her faith in him had triumphed for a long while over silence and neglect; but about this time it began to flag, and she asked herself if Gordon might not be right after all in his opinion of the relative whom from the first he had seemed

to doubt. He was wise enough usually in his judgments, she thought; at any rate she had yielded herself implicitly to them in other matters. Why should she have rebelled, and set herself so obstinately against him in this? She startled him one day when he had looked in for one of his flying visits after office hours by asking him:

"Gordon, do you know that Robin Herne is in town?"

To her surprise he answered very quietly:

"Yes."

"Have you seen him then?" she said quickly, and with a little pant in her breath which betrayed the excitement within, and annoyed her cousin.

He had hoped from her silence of late that she was beginning to forget the young man who had so wilfully disturbed her maiden peace; but he answered her at once, though in a tone unconsciously repressive:

"Yes, two or three times."

She drew a long breath, and her face, which had flushed at asking the question, grew very pale.

"Does he not know I am here, do you think?" she asked, in a lower tone than before.

"Yes, I conclude so;" with some surprise. "He has never said anything about it, though I mentioned having been with you one evening. My meetings with him have been strictly in connection with his sister. I fancied we had a clue to finding her last week, but it turned out to be some other girl. We hardly ever speak of anything else. But why do you ask?"

"Because" her voice faltered uncontrollably, and something like a mist seemed to rise before her eyes and blind her. "He has never asked after *me* then?" she said, her two hands pressed tightly together at the palms, as if to keep back the emotion which was struggling for expression.

And Gordon answered very clearly and distinctly :

"No, he has never made any allusion to you whatever."

If he had had any idea of the suffering he was inflicting on her, this slender little creature with the childlike, wistful eyes standing at his side, he would certainly have softened his answers or the mode of giving them ; for Gordon had no liking for inflicting pain, and though his stern sense of brotherhood would

have led him to sacrifice her whole earthly happiness rather than allow her to descend by one hair's breadth from the pure and lofty altitude to which he loved to raise her, principle might have been modified in practice when it came to wringing her heart-strings as he was doing now ; but she made no reply, did not speak at all indeed, for some minutes ; and he never guessed—how could he ?—of the bitter tide of pain and humiliation which was fighting against maidenly dignity and reserve and being beaten down and conquered so near him. He even went on after the silence had lasted a few moments and said :

“ I fancy he is a frivolous young fellow when his feelings are not worked up as they are at present by his sister's disappearance ; but he doesn't seem a scamp, and therefore I think, Lisa, you must have been mistaken. Of course I do not know the exact words he used to you, but I can't help fancying you must have falsely estimated his meaning, or——”

She put up her hand quickly. She had not flinched from the cruel wound he had inflicted on her a moment back. It was necessary to bear—nay, even to invite it, that she might

know whether she was right or wrong in trusting in her lover's constancy; but there is a limit to all human fortitude, and this calm, moral vivisection was more than she could bear.

"Yes," she said hurriedly, and in a voice which did not sound like her own, "you are right. I was . . . *mistaken* . . . that is all. Thank you for telling me, dear. We . . . we won't speak of it again. I would rather not."

"And you are quite right," said Gordon approvingly. He was pleased with her now, feeling that she was not going to be wilful and indocile after all. "How do you get on with Lyle?" he asked, with a ready change from the unpleasant subject. "She seems to me to have more in her than I fancied—a vein of religious earnestness which, if properly worked, would, I believe, break through the crust of worldliness which has grown up around it. Doesn't it seem so to you, Lisa?"

"I—I hardly know," said Ellice absently. Her mind was full of a very different matter from Lyle's religion or want of religion, and the latter was not in the habit of discussing theology in general and early church discipline with *her*. Lyle always chose her conversation

discriminatingly, and with a view to the feelings and opinions of the person addressed ; but Gordon was not aware of this, and his answer betrayed a little pique.

“ Ah ! I forgot ; it is a subject in which you don't take much interest ; but perhaps when you get a little older you will find out, as Lyle has done, that it is the salt of life, after all, and more important than the trumpery little matters with which we fret and delight ourselves in our every-day existence.”

Perhaps it was fortunate that Ellice's mind was too much crushed at the moment to take in what he was saying ; or she might have felt this rather hard, Lyle's enjoyment of the “ salt ” in question being strictly reserved for Gordon Maxwell and a certain high-church curate of her acquaintance. With both these two men, equally worthy and earnest, she was a great favourite at present, for to both she said exactly the same things about devotional services, church regulations, fasting and the ‘ dear London poor,’ etc., varying her conversation a little, it is true, so as to suit their different views, as, for instance, when she said to young Ffoulkes Surcingle, “ I sometimes hardly know

how to be grateful enough for our dear Anglican Church, with its rich ritual and pure Catholic faith, uncorrupted by those errors which have crept into the Roman branch and separated them from us. Ah ! If only all our people could appreciate the privileges we and they, too, enjoy !" while to Gordon she said : " Do not think too badly of me for not being able as yet to believe all you do. Though I am outside your Church, yet I respect it heartily, and reverence it as I never could that poor imitation of its ritual, which is disturbing ours at present and causing such trouble among our people. *You* are honest, Mr. Maxwell ;" which flattered poor Gordon's vanity and made both him and young Surcingle (as true and hard-working a young fellow as ever stepped) think anything but badly of her. Yet even Ellice could have told how lightly Lyle talked of such matters at other times ; and how thoroughly worldly she was at heart, devoting herself to the " trumpery little " cares and delights of London society life with a tireless persistency, which, at times, almost jarred on the younger girl.

The latter, indeed, from having grown up in a simple and less unnatural atmosphere,

had imbibed, with all her pretty Spanish ways and graceful modes of dress and speech, a certain seriousness and unworldliness not very dissimilar from the "Mayflower" Puritan maidens of old. Her religion was not one of form or talk. She loved her God and could say her simple prayers to him in a Spanish chapel ; or lead the village choir in the parish church at Merehatch with equal devotion and happiness. True, she did not know much about creeds and dogmas, hers was summed up broadly in the belief in one God and one Saviour to be loved and followed after, and a good many different ways of doing both. Gordon's way was not the same as hers, but what did that matter so long as it led him to the same end ? People could only go the way they had been taught, and if the object was the same, what could the road signify ?

This was Ellice's creed, a highly unorthodox and illogical one, perhaps, as I need not point out to my better instructed readers, but one which contributed greatly to the peace and happiness of her life, and for which the circumstances of her early life must be regarded as in some sort answerable.

She made no answer to Gordon's remark at

present, hardly hearing it indeed, so little did Lyle and her religious feelings matter to her just then; but when her cousin, remembering that he had a book in his pocket for the latter young lady, rose to give it her, she laid her hand on his arm and said gently:

"Wait one moment, dear. I want to say something to you."

"What about, Lisa? Nothing wrong is there?" as he looked down in her face, which, even to his eyes, had grown wonderfully older and whiter in the last ten minutes.

"No; but I have been thinking—I cannot stay here always, Gordon."

"Well, what then?"

"Where am I to go when I leave? They do not want me at the Croft, and I have no other home."

"I hope it would not be difficult to find you another, with Uncle Herne's sanction, if it were needed, Lisa; but you are not leaving here yet, and before you do, Margaret may be found or her brother have returned to college, and their parents want you back."

"I do not think that is likely," said Ellice; "and—and—" her voice trembling very much, "even if they did—I—I think now—I had

rather—Gordon,” breaking out with sudden impetuosity : “ I *could* not go back as things are. You are the only person belonging to me. Won’t you think for me, and try to find me some place where I can go when I leave here ?”

“ But why do you talk of leaving yet ? Are you getting tired of them ?”

“ No ; but I have thought perhaps they do not expect me to stay long. Mrs. Devereux was talking yesterday of something they must do when I am gone ; and though people used to come to us at the estancia and stay for months, even without an invitation, I am not sure that it is the same in England. What did they say in their letter to you when they invited me ?”

“ I forget ; but if they wanted you to go I should think they would tell you so. I would in a moment,” said Gordon, with a cheerful ignorance of the ways of society, which it would have killed Lyle to hear. “ But, Lisa, don’t imagine I have not thought about your future ; and I think I know of a home where you would not only be safe and happy, but useful to others, and living for some one besides yourself.”

It seemed to Ellice just then as if it were a

cruel mockery to talk of her being happy anywhere ; but safety and usefulness sounded pleasant, and she was too crushed even to ask more about it then. Gordon was sure to know what was good for her ; and she was content to leave it to him.

She felt almost glad when he went away shortly afterwards, that she might creep up to her own room and drop the mask of bravery which she had worn downstairs. For Robin not only to be in the same town with her, but to know where she was, to be meeting her adopted brother and never even to ask after her, or mention her name—oh ! it was too cruel. And she had loved him so well, she had believed in him so loyally. How could he have been false to her ? How *could* he ?

She was out walking with Lyle on the following morning. It was October now, and the leaves of the horse-chestnuts in Kensington Gardens were turning to brown, and the maples to red and gold. Dingy brick houses blushed bright under the crimson wreaths of virginia-creeper draping their smoke-blackened walls, and china asters, yellow, white and red, with here and there a tall purple dahlia, made gay the borders in London squares and

gardens. Above, the sky was a faint, cool grey ; but there must have been sun somewhere ; for as they came into view of the Round Pond in the gardens, they could see the gilded pinnacle of that triumph of gingerbread ugliness, the Albert Memorial, glittering like a star above the intervening foliage ; and there was a gleam of steely light on the ruffled waters of the pond, where a score or so of children were amusing themselves by throwing bread to the gaily-feathered water-fowl or swimming their toy boats on the surface of the mimic sea.

Lyle and Ellice turned away from the noisy, shouting little crowd with its circumference of nursery-maids and their attendant soldiery, and struck across the gardens in the direction of the Serpentine. It was one of Lyle's ways of preserving her youth and complexion to take morning walks whenever the weather permitted, and Ellice was only too glad to get out into the air, away from the streets with their Babel of wheels and cries and voices and crowds of jostling passengers, and into the quiet shadow of the trees, with the rooks cawing in the tall elm-tops overhead, and their own footsteps making no sound on

the humid path where the leaves were already lying in brown, rustling garlands. They did not meet many people in these parts, now and then a governess with a couple of long-legged, fuzzy-haired pupils at her side, a girl with the unmistakable look of waiting for her lover, or more rarely a man waiting for his sweetheart ; now and then the two together "taking their pleasure sadly," as the French have it against us.

"But there are not half so many as in the spring-time," said Lyle. "That is the time for lovers. They seem to come out with the horse-chestnut blossoms and the may. Now, I believe that one half of those here come for no other purpose than to meditate on the best way of committing suicide. *Felo de se* becomes fashionable in London as soon as the leaves begin to fall, you know. Look at that young man now getting up from the bench near us. He's evidently a gentleman and has nothing to do ; but doesn't he look as if he were meditating on nothing less dismal than the relative merits of laudanum or a saloon-pistol for putting himself out of this weary world? Perhaps, however — Why, Ellice, do you know him?"

For Ellice, glancing at the person adverted to, had stopped short with a little startled cry. The gentleman in question was Robin Herne ; and as her eyes met his, she saw that he had recognised her first.

Whether he had meant to pass her by, or with only a bow, she could not tell. Having seen her from a distance, *he* had had time to recover his composure even if he had ever lost it ; while her self-command had deserted her in a way which would have been simply impossible to a London girl ; and for which her own sense of womanly dignity, inexperienced as she was in the *convenances* of society, made her bitterly reproach herself. She was indeed trembling all over, and her very lips were white with the suddenness of the rencontre so long looked for ; but she had no time to recover herself, for he had stopped also, as of course in duty bound, and she found herself touching his hand and even introducing him to Lyle as though they were only ordinary acquaintances and he had never held her in his arms that day at Hardleigh End among the ferns and flowering sedges by the river's side. Lyle's face had worn an expression of well-bred surprise just sufficiently marked to

show that she required some explanation of Ellice's extraordinary lapse from good manners; but at the mention of Robin's name it disappeared, and she came to the fore at once, smiling so pleasantly that her bow seemed twenty times more cordial than Ellice's handshake.

"Mr. Herne?" she repeated. "What a pleasant surprise for Lisa! and how fortunate that we met you! I suppose you have only just arrived in town, or she would have seen you before. Were you on your way to us now? It is nearly lunch-time and I am sure my mother will be most pleased to see you."

But Robin said he could not go back with them then; though the why and wherefore seemed rather vague and indistinct. His eyes were fixed on Ellice's pale face and nervous lips, which had not seconded the invitation by so much as a look or word. Lyle's eyes took in both faces.

"You can't? I am sorry," she said, "for I can see Ellice is disappointed. She is moping *dreadfully* with us, you know. Indeed I am afraid you must think her looking quite ill. We do."

"You are not looking well," said Robin, his eyes kindling with a quick, tender anxiety which sent the blood in a hot rush to Ellice's cheeks. "Have you—I hope you have not been ailing since I saw you?"

"I think she is dying of *ennui*," Lyle put in gaily as Ellice answered in the negative. "But you know what London is at this season, perfectly horrible. You have just turned up at the right time to prevent her running away in despair; and I hope you will come to see her as soon as you can."

"I am only passing through town myself thank you," said Robin. What else could he say if Ellice *would* not speak? Her silence seemed only too sure a confirmation of all he had heard. "My father is still very ill; and though I have been up on—business for him, I go down to-morrow to see him and my mother. She is in great trouble about him;" and again he looked at Ellice, it seemed to her reproachfully. "I am afraid therefore I shall not have time to call on you; and I must not keep you standing now. Good-bye." He lifted his hat as he spoke, and after a second's hesitation held out his hand to Ellice. She put hers into it; but though he saw her

lips move, no sound came from them : not a single word ; and her eyes, lifted to him for one second, seemed to him as though they were full of tears. Changing his mind on the impulse of that idea, he turned to Lyle.

"If, however, I might look in for five minutes this evening?" he said. "Perhaps Miss Devereux might have some message for my mother;" and being given cordial permission so to do by Lyle, seconded by a faint word or two from Ellice, he went on his way and left them.

But when they were out of sight, when the tall black trunks and yellow leaves had swallowed them up, and he had gone far enough to have time to reflect, Robin bitterly reproached himself for his changeableness in accepting the elder Miss Devereux's invitation. What had he done it for? Ellice had not expressed a word of pleasure at meeting him, or of hope that she should see him again. Could any one indeed have been more icily cold to him than she had shown herself on this their first meeting after so long and sad a parting? Truly she must have been very anxious to make him realise that she had

changed her mind before she could have brought herself to behave with such absolute unfriendliness to one who had been her loyal servant and companion ever since her arrival in England ; and when he *had* realised it, and had summoned up manliness enough to show her that he did so by putting an end to the interview, why, in Heaven's name, had he gone back from his resolution, and committed himself to what could only be pain, pain keen and unavailing, to both ? Because he felt her hand—such a pretty little hand even in its glove !—tremble as he held it in his own, and fancied he saw a mist of unshed tears over the sweet grey eyes so dear to him ? Because of the shadow which had come over her small face, and the paleness in her cheek ? But all these things might be, and love for him make up no part of them. She was shy and sensitive, and the very sight of him and consciousness of how he must have suffered through her might have been distressing to her.

Would it not be better and more manly for him to break his engagement and not go near the house ? It could do him no good to see her again, and perhaps Gordon Maxwell might be there. Yes, he would stay away.

CHAPTER V.

"SHE says she's well enough to go out, and she will."

"She ain't then. Why, she's just as weak as weak, an' couldn't sit for 'alf an hour without faintin'."

"Well, you tell her so then, Lottie, for she's in one o' 'er wilful moods, an' won't mind me. She says she ain't goin' to be eatin' and sleepin' at our expense no longer."

"She's a fool, an' I'll tell her that. As if I didn't earn four shillings from old Matherson yesterday, and am goin' to do the same to-day ! Here, I'll go to 'er."

Two girls were standing outside the door of a room on the second floor of a cheap lodging-house in Pimlico ; pretty girls both, though one was evidently in the last stage of consumption, and wearing a big shawl pinned

over her shabby cotton gown ; while the other, whose short, reddish hair curled over her head like a boy's, had on a broad-brimmed hat of blue felt, trimmed with gold braid, stuck on the back of her head, a smart cloth jacket, at least two sizes too small for her, buttoned over her exceedingly plump figure, and a pink necktie knotted loosely round her full white throat. She opened the door she had been leaning against as she spoke, and the other followed her into a small room, very dirty and stuffy, and boasting little more furniture than a wooden bedstead, a ragged horsehair arm-chair, and two smaller cane ones, a cupboard which contained the household supply of coals, provisions, and china, and a table covered with a litter of food, work-materials, and unwashed cups and plates.

Leaning against the window-frame, with one hand holding on to the dingy curtain as if for support, and her head resting upon it, stood another girl, gazing languidly out over a labyrinth of dingy slates, tumble-down chimney-pots, and narrow courtyards filled with frowsy linen hanging out to dry, and squalling children, to the strip of pale blue sky visible beyond. A tall, dark girl, with eyes large by

nature and rendered larger by recent illness, and a quantity of rich black hair, which had partly fallen down from the twist in which it had been fastened, and hung in a loose mass against her sunken cheeks and round her waist — Margaret Herne, in other words, though no one here knew her by that name.

“Look ’ere, Hester,” said the curly-headed girl, going up to her and touching her on the shoulder, “Fanny says you’ve been talking an ’eap of nonsense. Now I ain’t goin’ to listen to a word of it, so shut up. Can’t you be content where you are?”

The girl addressed turned slowly round.

“It isn’t nonsense, Charlotte. Why shouldn’t I go out and earn money like you if I can? And you said I could.”

“Yes, when you’re well enuff; but you ain’t yet, so there’s a hend of it. Look ’ere, I don’t want to be rude, but you’ll ’ave to get some flesh on afore you’re any good to my man as a model, or any other, unless you want to set to Fildes or Lucas, and them as goes in for misery an’ skillintons. *They* might take you on, but I don’t know nothink about ’em; so I can’t say even that for certain;” and the girl glanced, not without complacency, at her own

buxom proportions as if for proof that she had nothing to do with the skeleton line of business. Margaret heaved a long, weary sigh.

"I shall never get well or fat in this close room. It is the air that chokes me. I feel as if I were being stifled," she said, with an impatient push to the window-sash, which, however, was raised as high as it would go. Lottie Vanning looked offended.

"Close, do you call it? Well, I don't know that it's any closer than other rooms. There's only me an' Fanny sleeps in it; an' down below there's five in the front room, Mr. an' Mrs. Fosset, an' three children. I don't see as there's nothink stiflin' in this."

Margaret's eyes went back to the bit of sky, and a sudden vision rose before them of her room at the Croft, with the vines and monthly roses thrusting in their green tendrils and sweet pink blossoms at the latticed casement, and the long sweeps of golden corn-field and wind-swept down, gay with purple heather, and fragrant with wild thyme, stretching away beyond. A sudden rush of tears came into her feverish eyes and she made no answer.

"I know what Hester means," said the

elder girl, striking into the rescue. "It's comin' arter the 'orspital makes this place sort o' stuffy. I felt it myself the first days, an' she's a country girl, you see, an' 'ould feel the change more. They make those 'orspital wards so big an hairy, one seems as if it did one good to breathe in 'em."

"*You're* always jolly anxious to get out of 'em, I know, an' it's difficult enough to get you in," retorted Charlotte sulkily. "I'm sure this last time I thought you'd ha' died afore ever I could get you to say you'd be took there."

"Yes, Lottie, but that was a'count o' leavin' you," said the other gently, and Miss Charlotte Vanning pouted more.

"As if I couldn't take care on myself, an' with that there Will Starling lookin' arter me like an' old grandmother too! I tell you what, Fanny, I've a jolly mind sometimes to go off on the spree just because you're always crawl, crawk, crawkin' at me like an old crow; so just see if I don't some day, there now! There's Stretton has promised to take Horry Flamstead, that big girl as I told you 'ad been settin' for the nood to 'im this summer, to Brighton for an 'oliday, an' she's quite

cock o' the walk about it. What's to hinder me doin' like 'er?"

"Because you'd never see me nor Will again if you did, Lottie," Fanny Vanning said, kissing her sister, with a world of entreaty in her blue, shining eyes. "I'd be dead afore ever you came back; an' as for Will, 'e'd never care to look in your face again, if it wasn't an honest one."

And then Charlotte Vanning, who was warm-hearted as well as warm-tempered, suddenly relented and returned the kiss, declaring that Fanny was a cunning old fox, and knew how to come over her nicely.

"An' good gracious '*Eving*! do you know what time it is, an' that I'll get a deuce of a slangin' from old Matherson if I ain't there in a jiffey?" she added, running her fingers hastily through the fuzzy red mane on her forehead which the last little passage had somewhat disarranged. "Look 'ere, Hester, if you feels up to a walk, why don't you an' Fanny go up to the Park? You ain't got nothink to do (that dress o' mine can wait, Fan), an' you could set there a bit an' look at the swells. It 'd do you no end o' good."

"Will you, Hester?" said Fanny, as her

pretty sister bounced out of the room and went clattering down the stairs. "You're always thinkin' on the country, an' it's just like it. Leastways there's the green grass an' trees, you know ; an' we can see 'ow the swell girls are dressed. I'd like to get a noo idea, if I could, for Lottie's 'panier,' an' it's not far."

"The Park?" repeated Margaret hesitatingly. "That is where ladies and gentlemen go to ride, isn't it? and others sit in long rows looking at them. I've heard Rob—my brother, talk of it, and—and others too. I would like to go there if it is green, but——"

"I'd stand the chairs, if you're thinking on that," said Fanny quickly. "They're a penny apiece, but that's nothink."

Margaret laughed.

"And we would be much better without them. What an idea to pay for sitting on chairs out-of-doors!" she said, thinking of the numberless times when she had rested on blossomy moors or grassy banks. "Can't we sit on the ground if we are tired? You are not afraid of damp, are you?"

"No," said Fanny, looking slightly shocked, much indeed as a Belgravian young lady from

one of the wealthy squares hard by might have looked if it had been proposed to her to walk up Regent Street by herself, or take a second-class ticket in the Underground; "but none but the gutter children think o' settin' about on the grass in the parks. I'd be ashamed to be seen doin' the like o' them, an' as I said, I'll stand the chairs, so put on your 'at an let's go."

But Margaret still hesitated.

"It was not the chair I was thinking about," she said. "I'd like *dreadfully* to go out in the air, Fanny; but don't crowds of people go there? *He* did, I know, and if he were in London and saw me . . . I'm afraid to go. There are people I don't want to see me; and if I went they might. I'll stay here."

She had dropped wearily into the mangy old armchair as she spoke, a cloud of languor and despondency, heavier than had ever rested on her face in the old days, coming over it. Fanny looked at her with half-compassionate curiosity.

"Come, that's nonsense," she said, laying her thin hand on the other's shoulder. "I don't know who you're afraid of— Mind, you telled me you were an honest girl, or I'd

never 'ave brought you 'ere on Lottie's 'count! —but you don't know what a place Lunnon is, if you haven't live in it. Why, you might go out a million million times an' not see the same people twice; an' as to the Park, it's empty enough out o' the season. Come along. You'll never get strong stived up 'ere, an' it'll do me good too. My breathin' was awful bad last night, though I didn't tell Lottie so."

And Margaret yielded and went. The longing to get away from houses and streets and under the shade of trees was as strong with her as with Ellice, too strong to be resisted; and though her dread of coming across Gerrant was more intense than her old craving to see him, she knew from the talk of the two models that daylight was too precious a thing in October to be wasted by artists in sauntering in the Park; and guessed that, if in London at all, Gerrant would be most likely to be in his studio. Of meeting with any of her own family she had no fear, not having seen the *Times* since she left home, and being in total ignorance both of how she was being sought after, and that Gordon and her brother were both within an hour's walk of her; so she put on her old straw hat and waterproof,

and sallied out at Fanny's side, drawing many eyes on herself by the length of her stride and the way she had of holding her head high and turning it and her great, defiant eyes from side to side, after the fashion of a newly-caught antelope from the rocky mountains.

"My! how folks do stare at us! Don't walk so fast, Hester; they'll think we've been up to summat wrong," Fanny said nervously. Lottie sometimes got "spoke to," and had chaffing offers of escort made to her, which she answered back with a repartee quick as it was pert; but people didn't open their eyes and stand and look after her as they did with this tall guest of hers. What a queer-looking girl she was!

Little enough did Fanny Vanning know of her in very truth. She had picked her up in the pulmonary ward of St. George's Hospital, where Margaret occupied the next bed to herself; and where poor Fanny had often been before. The latter had caught the treacherous disease of which she was dying by sitting to an artist in a draughty studio and very light drapery through a bitter December day two years ago; and at times it gained such head that she must have succumbed to it if

she had remained in the small, badly-warmed and worse-ventilated room in which she and Lottie slept and lived ; so when her cough got so bad that she could not lie down at night, and the blood-spitting so frequent as to bring on faintness, she used to get an indoor ticket from a lady who was kind to her, and go off meekly to the " orspital " till medicine, and good food, and warmth had so far restored her as to enable her to return to the home of which her younger sister had now become the chief bread-winner.

The feverish misery of a pair of great black eyes in the bed next to hers first attracted her attention to their owner ; and she learnt from the nurse that the patient was a girl called Esther Vaughan, and suffering from a severe attack of pleurisy, the result of exposure and a neglected cold. This nurse had a sister who let lodgings in a narrow street close to the Charing Cross Station ; and it was through her that Margaret had got admitted into the ward. She had taken a room at this woman's house on first arriving from France ; had been taken ill there a few days later, and when her landlady found that the malady was likely to be serious, and that

the invalid had no money to pay for doctors or medicine, or indeed to keep on her room for more than another week, she had insisted on either being allowed to send for the girl's relations, or to despatch her to a hospital without delay.

Margaret was suffering almost too much by then to care what became of her ; but she accepted the latter alternative without a moment's delay ; and her landlady, not an unkindly woman at bottom, bestirred herself so actively in the matter, that within twenty-four hours her lodger was comfortably established in the narrow white bed beside that occupied by Fanny Vanning in St. George's Hospital. This was all the nurse knew about her ; and Fanny herself learnt little more, Margaret being the most uncommunicative of all the fellow-sufferers she had ever met. At first, indeed, the country girl believed that she was going to die ; and had she done so it is certain that she would have died dumbly, and that nothing might have been known of her fate for years, if ever, by those most interested in it. But though the strength of her constitution asserted itself ; and she not only lived but mended more rapidly than

had been anticipated, she vouchsafed but little information about herself to any of her attendants. Even Fanny, whose gentle heart had been moved to pity by the too evident suffering and loneliness of her companion, received more than one savage rebuff in return for her compassionate advances and questions; and it is doubtful if she would have ventured on pursuing them if the accident of Lottie's coming to visit her one day, and by her voluble chatter enlightening all that end of the ward as to her own and her sister's profession, had not awakened Margaret's interest in the two. Fanny caught the fierce black eyes fixed on her in a kind of wistful inquiry several times after that; and responding generously to the unspoken appeal, soon got into conversation with her hitherto silent and churlish companion; telling her all about herself, her work and earnings, and gradually dragging out the return information that the girl to whom she was talking knew absolutely no one in London, had no home and no money; nor the slightest idea what to do with herself when she left the hospital. She had never been in London before, had been born in the country; and had only come from France a

few days before she had been taken ill. What had she done in those days? Gone to a picture-gallery while it was light; and once walked down the Strand in the evening that she might see the outside of a theatre. She would have liked to have gone in; but there was such a crowd and they jostled her. No, she was not frightened, but it was very insolent of common, low men like that to go pushing against her, and she didn't like it. She had only five and sixpence left now; and she didn't suppose it would last her long. Did Fanny (this was asked very abruptly) think she could earn money by going out as model? She had sat to a painter before, and didn't mind that at all.

The question puzzled Fanny greatly, coming on what had preceded it. To have no friends and no money, and to spend your time in looking at picture-galleries and *object to being jostled!* It was an anomaly altogether beyond comprehension. Fanny herself was an orphan, with no outside relations except an old aunt, who kept a sugar-plum shop in some little country town in Somersetshire. Her father had been a model before her, and, having lost his wife early, had brought up the two children in his

own trade ; so that Lottie had been "sitting" ever since she was a mere baby. A risky and terrible trade for any girl in any city, perhaps the riskiest and most terrible that can well be found ; but Vanning himself, though a harsh and sometimes brutal father, had always been a respectable man, and was determined that his daughters should be the same. His wife had been a pious Methodist woman, and Fanny had taken after her so closely as not only to become a proverb for virtue and steadiness among her own set, but to act as a second mother in watching over and guiding her more thoughtless sister ; and with so much success, that, though giddy and wilful as a kitten, and a very pretty kitten, Lottie had not merely maintained her respectability but was now in her eighteenth year engaged to be married to the steadiest of young journeymen builders in Holborn ; and was only waiting till they had "got on a bit more," to become a matron with a parlour and "chiney" of her own, and "not obligated to sit for no men to look at never no more, without it was 'er 'usband."

Still, with all this, poor Fanny had often

very anxious days. Propriety and respectability were not easy for girls, who, from the nature of their profession, were thrown among many of the lowest of their own sex, and the least scrupulous of the other, who went to music-halls and cheap theatres when they wanted a treat; and found their highest delight in a smart gown or a hot supper. Lottie didn't mind taking any amount of presents from such of her employers as were generous enough to give them, and now and then a kiss into the bargain; and words had arisen with Will Starling in consequence, and scenes between the lovers which filled Fanny's anxious soul with terror lest the marriage from which she hoped so much should be broken off; so that now, when she saw another girl even more alone than Lottie, in having no sister, proposing to enter the same road with no knowledge of its perils, and, indeed, with what seemed to Fanny the most superhuman ignorance of every-day life altogether, the good girl's pity and interest for her increased, and she began to cast about in her mind as to how she could befriend her.

"What have you been?" she asked Margaret after that speech about the "jostling,"

which had filled her with almost more wonder than anything else. "You aren't a common girl like the rest on us. I can tell that by your way o' speakin', and your 'ands. You've never done no work with *them*. An' you aren't free enough with your tongue for a shop-girl neither. 'Ave you been a teacher or a lady's-maid?"

"No," said Margaret shortly; "I've been nothing. I was taken care of—on a farm, and helped in the house; but that's all I've ever done."

"Why did you leave it, then?"

"Never mind. I wanted to leave. It was my own doing."

"An' wouldn't you go back if you could? It sounds like 'eaven to me. I can't fancy your leavin' of it," cried Fanny, her eyes full of wonder. "Couldn't you go back?"

"No; they—they would not have anything to say to me now, and I would not ask them. Let that alone, please. I thought you might be able to help me to some work like yours; I think I should do for that; but if you wouldn't like to——"

"Oh! but I would like," said Fanny warmly; "you seem so terrible lonesome; an' as to a

model, you're 'andsome enough to make a grand one, an' I think I know a hartist, a good-natured old feller, too, who'd be glad to 'ave you ; but it's awful tiring work a' times ; an' you'd not be strong enough to go to it for a good bit arter you're out o' 'ere."

" Can't I stay here till I *am* strong enough ?" asked Margaret ; but Fanny shook her head.

" See 'ere," she said, after a minute's pause. " I've got an idea inter my 'ead, but I must go over it a bit an' talk to Lottie fust. I'm goin' away to-morrer, you know, but I'll come an' see you till yer able to get out yerself ; an' then may be we'll arrange something."

And accordingly, when, after the lapse of a few days, she returned to pay Margaret a visit, she brought the idea with her and propounded it in a very few words.

It was simply this, that when Margaret left the hospital, she should go to them, sharing their rooms for nothing while she had nothing, paying when she could pay ; and staying on there with Fanny, if they liked one another well enough, after Lottie was married. I don't think Margaret at all appreciated the generosity of the proposal so simply made, or guessed that it would entail double work and

no little self-sacrifice on her entertainers; but the poor are so used to helping one another that Fanny herself thought little of the matter, and only hesitated on another point, which, after Margaret had agreed to her proposal, she, with some hesitation, brought to light.

"There's one thing," she said, "I don't think it of you; for you don't look nor talk like that sort; but then you comes from different parts to we, and I don't know nothink about you arter all. I *must* be careful o' Lottie, 'cos I promised father an' mother too I would be; and she's my own sister; an Will Starling trusts me to look arter 'er into the bargain. I'll 'elp you anyhow while you're weakly, don't be afeard o' my goin' back from that; but if you've come to this through getting into trouble—I mean," with the quaint, plain-spokenness of her order, "if you ain't been leadin' an honest life, I can't ask you to live on wi' Lottie, and there's the fac' of it."

"I don't know what you mean," cried Margaret, flushing haughtily. "You have no right to say such things to me; it is very impertinent——"

But Fanny interrupted her, not at all sharply:

“Well, well, don’t be ’uffy. I took you to be honest an’ I told you so ; but you *are* queer, there’s no denyin’ of it ; an’ I thought it best to make sure. I do believe you wouldn’t be un’ansome enough to deceive me when I’ve been fair an’ candid with you ; so if you’ll come to us I’ll know it’s all square ; an’ you’ll be right welcome.”

And Margaret went to them as soon as she was able to be moved ; and never another question was asked or doubt raised against her by either of the girls in whose home she found a shelter.

Yet it must have been a terrible experience to her, reared as she had been in all the comforts and decencies of home life at the Croft, this small, frowsy room, with a dark closet opening out of it, in which she slept (Lottie and Fanny had both offered their half of the bed instead, but Margaret had elected to take the closet in preference), and the companionship of these two “girls of the people,” with an occasional visit from the washerwoman on the first-floor below, and more frequent ones from Will Starling, who was at present engaged on the erection of some new schools belonging to the little Roman Catholic

church of St. Ethelberta in Holborn. The young man used to come in to drink tea with his sweetheart, sitting at the same table with Margaret, who shrank from him with equal haughtiness on Sundays when, in his smart blue satin tie, and redolent of yellow soap, he appeared to take Lottie for an outing, as on weekdays when he sat down with them in his plaster-covered jacket, pipe in mouth and warm from work. She never guessed—how should she?—that perhaps that very morning he had touched his hat to Gordon Maxwell, or exchanged a word with the latter about the building in course of erection, and Starling dreamt as little of any possible connection between Lottie's queer lodger and the tall young engineering gentleman who had always a civil sentence for the workmen; little thinking that one of them carried with him a clue to the girl he was searching for with heart and soul. A strange chance, indeed! one of those which an accidental word might break down at any moment; but Margaret never dreamt of saying it. She was eating out her heart in hungry yearning for the kindly parent-faces, the ivy-mantled walls, and pure, fresh breezes of the home of which

she had once wearied, yet to which, thinking that she would be spurned from it, she had no thought of ever returning.

“They would rather know I was dead than see me back now,” she said to herself in that strange ignorance of those belonging to her, which her self-absorbed life had engendered : and yet there were days when she felt as though she could not endure her present surroundings any longer ; and when only a recollection of the greater misery of those before she was taken to the hospital, those which came back to her now and then like a fevered nightmare, prevented her from flying from it, and taking her chance again in the wide world.

CHAPTER VI.

"Now, Ellice, you had better tell me all about it. You were in love with him and you quarrelled, or the old people didn't approve of it, which was it? Come, be frank; for I've known all along that something was wrong, and I shall find out all about it as soon as he comes. You little, ridiculous thing, to think you could make-believe at being happy with that white face of yours! Why, my only doubt was as to whether it was this young Herne, or the dear good cousin who takes such paternal care of you."

The two Devereux girls had come in from their walk after that meeting with Robin, and Lyle had followed her cousin to the latter's room and was speaking with her hand upon the latter's shoulders. She had tried a good deal of gentle chaff on their way from the

gardens ; but, instead of meeting or answering it, Ellice had looked so genuinely distressed, and replied by such an imploring "Please don't now, Lyle," that the latter let her alone until they arrived at the house. Ellice had had time to recover by then, and she turned round and faced her courageously.

"Indeed, Lyle, you are wrong. I have never quarrelled with Robin at all. We have always been great friends ; and as for Gordon --I don't know what you mean ! You *know* I haven't quarrelled with him. He has never given me any cause."

"Nor Mr. Herne either, my child ?"

"No, Lyle, nor Mr. Herne either." It was not quite true, and she felt it ; but certainly she had not quarrelled with him, nor did she mean to do so.

"Then why were you so unkind to him, my dear ?"

"I did not mean to be unkind. Was I ?"

Lyle burst into a little, silvery laugh.

"Were you ! What, he is your guardian's son, you have been great friends and living in the same house for months ; and yet when you meet you hardly give him your hand, and won't say a civil word to him, no, nor even

second my politeness in asking him to come and see you. I really felt quite uncomfortable, he looked so wretched, poor fellow ! and yet you say you haven't quarrelled !"

"I did not think he looked wretched, Lyle," said Ellice, colouring painfully. "You would not have him look very lively when his poor father is so ill, and . . . and he may have other troubles as well."

"I think it's very likely he has other troubles, my dear. What I wonder at is that, knowing them, you should be so unsympathetic. Why, you never even inquired after the father."

"Oh, Lyle ! did I not ?" but indeed in the pain and confusion of the meeting Ellice hardly knew what she had or had not said. "Surely you must be mistaken ; but—but I was so taken by surprise ; and he seemed in such a hurry to go. I should be very sorry if he thought I did not care about the dear old Squire."

"Only you don't want him to think you care for the dear young one ! Ellice, Ellice, I never saw a girl blush like you do. Why, you dear little innocent, don't you know that the very way to prove that you do care for a

man is to overact indifference to him as forcibly as you did to-day?"

Ellice blushed deeper yet. Was it so indeed? Lyle knew more of the world than she; and if right, how she must have betrayed herself. She made one more effort at self-defence.

"But I do care for him very much, Lyle. I should be very sorry to be indifferent to him when he has always been so good to me; only——"

"Only he wants something warmer in return for his goodness, is that it, Cousin Lisa? Then is Gordon really the favourite?"

"*Gordon!* Surely, Lyle, you are not going to tease me about him! Gordon, *my brother?*"

"He is not your brother really, my dear."

"He is exactly the same; and we love each other just as dearly as if he were one. I thought you understood that long ago."

"My dear little cousin, don't be angry. I was only joking."

"But please, Lyle, don't joke about Gordon in that way. It would never have entered into my head that any one *could*. Don't you know that he is going to be a priest, and

wouldn't care about any woman? And even if he did, it would make no difference to me. *Me!* Why he is more severe with me than papa ever was. I cannot bear that such an idea should have even come into your head."

"Well, well, you needn't be so shocked, Lisa. As I said, he is not your brother really, so there was no harm in my idea. However, I see I was wrong, and Mr. Herne is the culprit after all. You are very mean not to take me into your confidence, I think; and I warn you I intend to find out all about it."

"If you can," said Ellice, trying to laugh.

"I shall try. Wait till he comes this evening, little madam, and you'll see. Do you know, I was wanting something to amuse me. I am getting rather tired of talking 'church' with the good Gordon."

Ellice felt a little warm.

"I thought you were so much interested in all that sort of thing, Lyle. *He* thinks you are. He was saying only the other day that he liked talking to you because you were so thoughtful and earnest; and he does not care for women generally."

"Did he say so? But you are right, Lisa; those things do interest me." Lyle had made

a slip and was anxious to retrieve it. She rather enjoyed the power of fascinating a woman-hater like Gordon Maxwell. If she could induce him to forget his prospective vows and fall regularly in love with her it would be something to boast : but that would never be if Ellice told him that she was only making game of him and his pet subjects. "Gordon is very superior to most young men," she said gravely. "You have not known him since you were children, or you would appreciate it as I do ; but I see you take all my little jokes *au sérieux* to-day, and I merely wanted to charm the soberness out of your face. I shall run away since you are so ungrateful : " and she did so : after which Ellice did feel grateful.

I don't think that the latter distrusted her cousin, or saw her as she was ; but perhaps the kindred blood in them made her quicker to feel the artificiality without being aware of it, and she never felt as thoroughly sympathetic with her as she did with other people.

Her thoughts, now that Lyle was gone and she was left alone, were not happy ones. Often as she had pictured meeting Robin

in the streets, and, indeed, when she first came to London she never went out without wondering and hoping if she would do so, the rencontre of to-day had taken her as completely by surprise as if she had last heard of him at the other side of the world. To be sure, since it had become plain to her that he did not care for her any more, her hope that she might meet him had been turned into a fear lest she should do so, and a sorrowful shrinking from the very thought of him; but that she should have shown this shrinking so unmistakably, that she should have lost her self-command so utterly as to deprive her of the power of speech, expose her to Lyle's shrewd guesses and perhaps make herself an object of compassion to the man himself, was something so exquisitely painful that the blushes, about which Lyle had laughed at her, came burning into her cheek at the thought of it, and brought the tears with them. What must he have thought of her? she asked herself, he who had sometimes vexed her by talking lightly of other girls, and the easy conquests men found them. *She* had been easy enough, in very truth; and now to have lost all dignity and maidenliness

as she had done, to stand like a statue, trembling and almost sick at the mere touch of his hand, forcing him to speak to her, and to accept Lyle's invitation when he had meant to pass her by through her utter want of self-command—oh! it was very grievous. For the more she thought of it the more she felt convinced that so far from meaning to come and see her of his own free will, it was only the accident of her recognising him which had prevented him from passing without even stopping to address her; and the conviction of this fact caused her a pang which lay far deeper than mere wounded pride or resentment. Robin was no scoundrel to amuse himself recklessly at an orphan girl's expense, nor to change to her as suddenly as he had done from mere fickleness. He must have some cause for his conduct; and what cause could there be unless he too believed in the cruel accusation of her being accessory to Margaret's misconduct? But surely, surely he who pretended to love her must have known her better; and, even if not, what right had he to judge her unheard and condemn her merely on the passionate suspicion of an old man struck down by illness before she had had

time to refute his injustice? The Squire might and indeed must be forgiven on the score of the shock and anguish to him of Margaret's flight; but Robin, her lover, *he* should have known her better. It was different with him, and for the moment pride and a just anger got the better of her grief, and she made up her mind that if he came that evening she would not see him. It would be well for him to feel that she resented the slur cast on her by him and his family, and to recognise that she in her turn refused to receive those who had cast her off with such pitiless harshness.

But this resolve did not last long. It had occurred to her all of a sudden that Robin's fickleness might not be from his heart after all, but was simply owing to his having failed to obtain his parents' consent to their union; and this explanation brought a balm and soothing with it which only those who feel that true love implies veneration for its object could understand. If this were the case, she, of all women, would be the last to resent his obedience, or desire him to set himself against his father and mother, more especially when they were in such grievous trouble. Certainly

he might have come or written to tell her so, instead of leaving her without word or sign as he had done; but perhaps he had not had courage for so painful a task, and had put it off in hopes of their relenting. Now that she thought of it, she remembered Lyle's comments on the unhappy look in his face, and recalled the pained expression in his eyes when they had met hers with a quick contraction of her own heart. Poor fellow! if this were the truth, he might have been weak and wanting in resolution, but not wicked or heartless; and the least she could do was to help him by being as brave as she could, and by meeting him simply as a friend and as if she understood without words that all else was at an end between them. It would be very hard perhaps, but it would be for *his* sake, and his part must be hard too. God would certainly help her if she tried to do her best to soften it to him.

It was that thought which brought her on to her knees, and when she got up from them, the afternoon sun shining into her room, found a light in her face which owed its origin to no outward luminary. She was very pale still, and there was a look in her eyes as though

she had come from the death-bed of one near and dear to her; but tears and weakness were gone, and she went downstairs and took her place with her aunt and cousin with so serene a manner, that Lyle was half deceived into wondering whether she had been mistaken in her morning's guess.

They were in the middle of the second course at dinner that evening when there came a double knock at the door, and the page who answered it returned to say that Mr. Herne was in the drawing-room. He begged the ladies would not disturb themselves, he would wait till they had finished; but Mrs. Devereux looked at Ellice, who, despite all her resolution, had turned as white as a ghost, and said kindly :

"You have almost finished, haven't you, my dear? Run up to your cousin, and don't mind waiting for us. I dare say he has plenty of messages from his people for you, and you can amuse him till Lyle and I come. Open the door for Miss Devereux, Tylon."

"Yes, Ellice, run up to him. I am sure you ought to do so after your cruelty this morning," said Lyle, in a laughing undertone, and with perhaps a trifle of malice in her

mirth. She fancied that Ellice would, from mere shamefacedness, refuse to go; but though in truth the girl's inclination was to do so, she did not give way to it, but rose from her seat with a quiet dignity for which Lyle had not given her credit, and saying, "Thank you, Aunt Devereux. I will tell him you will come soon," left the room.

If, when on the friendly loneliness of the staircase without, she put her hands over her pale face and breathed one hasty prayer for strength and self-mastery, no one knew of it. The step with which she entered the drawing-room was as composed and her manner as kind and gentle as that with which any friend, knowing of the trouble Robin was in, could have come to greet him.

And he felt it so : felt it more cruelly than the coldness and almost incivility of her manner in the morning. *That* might have been agitation. This was the expression of her real sentiments after she had had time to recover herself, and as he resumed his seat and answered her questions about his father's health, he almost felt as if he were speaking to some stranger with Ellice's face and dress, and felt ready to curse his folly in having,

without rhyme or reason, broken the resolution he had made, and hurried off in desperate haste to the very house he had determined that he would not enter. Well, all he could do now was to be a man, and meet her on her own ground. He need not stay many minutes.

"I did not ask after the Squire or your mother as I wished this morning," Ellice said, after her first inquiries, "because I was so much taken by surprise at meeting you, and—and I did not know how much to say. They only know here that my guardian is ill."

She blushed very much as she made this little explanation, and Robin coloured too, partly because she did, and partly from annoyance that she should have to blush at the mention of any one connected with him.

"So much the better," he said shortly, and with a perversity which pained her. "I still hope that my poor, foolish sister may return to us; but of course it would be unpleasant to you even to allude to her among your relations now; and after all, silence is perhaps kindest."

Ellice's lip quivered at the insinuation, but though he only made it from soreness and a

half hope that she would indignantly disclaim the feeling attributed to her, she said nothing, feeling that she could not trust her voice to defend herself, and that it was better he should think what he liked than for her to break down in the composure she found such a difficulty in maintaining. After a moment, however, she said gravely :

"I have not seen Gordon for two or three days. Have you heard *nothing* from Margaret since? I was in hopes when you said you were going down to the Croft to-morrow that you had some news to take them."

"Only this, that she is not with the man for whom she left us, nor has she been since they arrived at Dieppe. I traced them there; but though he went on to Paris, and afterwards passed through here and went to Brussels, she was not with him, and is not now."

"You have seen him then?"

"Not since I left Paris. I have vainly tried to do so, but the coward refused to meet or fight me; and though Maxwell, your cousin, went with me to his lodgings here, and afterwards to Brussels that he might give him a message from me, the cur managed

to elude us both times. I thought Maxwell might have mentioned as much to you?"

"No."

It was only one word and very gently spoken, but it had the effect of stopping Robin's mouth completely. The pure and tender sympathy in her eyes as she asked him after his lost sister had led him on to answer her as frankly as though she had been one of the family, or his wife; but his last words had caused the fair face he was looking at to change from white to red with startling rapidity, and the sight recalled him to himself.

"I beg your pardon," he said hastily, and flushing up with annoyance at his own forgetfulness, though indeed Ellice's change of colour was only due to the thought of what might have been the result if Gerrant had consented to meet her lover. Robin might have been killed, might never have seen her again; and Gordon had tried to arrange it, had been in Brussels, and yet had never said a word to her on the subject.

"I forgot that I ought not to talk to *you* of these matters," he went on irritably. "Your cousin had more discrimination, and I must ask you to forgive me. "I need not tell you

that I did not mean any disrespect to you or——”

But Ellice stopped him, her large eyes looking at him, full of such grave dignity and innocence of all false shame or pharisaism as made him feel as if he could have stooped down and kissed her little white hands in reverence.

“*Disrespect!* How could you show me disrespect by answering what *I* asked you? Would you have me forget Margaret because she has done wrong and must be unhappy and in trouble? I think of her day and night. How can it hurt me to speak of her?”

“No, you are too pure and good for it to hurt you,” said Robin quickly; “but there are other good women who would fancy it did, and shut their ears against the mention of any one who had disgraced herself by running away, as our poor Maggie—God help her!—has done.”

“Robin!” cried Ellice. Her eyes were swimming in tears at the sorrowful bitterness of his tone. She half rose from her seat with the impulse to go to and comfort him; but his eyes were on the ground and did not see

the movement ; and she had time to recollect herself and say in a calmer tone, " Do not be too anxious or disheartened about her. Perhaps when you get home you will find she has written to her mother ; and, anyhow, remember you leave Gordon here ; and if she should come to London he will be sure to find her. He knows the most out-of-the-way places, and he will do his best to help you. You may be sure of that."

She spoke very earnestly, hoping to cheer him ; but the wretched misunderstanding between them made Robin misconstrue her warmth ; and there was an extra constraint in his manner as he answered, forcing himself to say what he felt was just, though with a cold formality which grated on Ellice.

" I do not know what we should have done without his assistance, as it is. It has been most generous of him, considering——" he stopped short and added abruptly, " But I shall return to town by the first train the day after to-morrow, and therefore shall not need to trouble him any more. It has been unfair to take up so much of his time already, when——when of course he would so much rather have given it to you." He took up his hat

as he spoke. It was not in human nature to go on discussing his rival's merits, and Ellice could not expect it of him : besides, the painfulness of the interview and his proximity to the fragile sweetness of her small fair face was getting too much for him.

"I won't detain you any longer," he said huskily. "You will make my apologies to your relations for coming at such an hour; and—and I suppose I may give your love to my mother. She must be missing you very much."

"If you will," said Ellice quickly; "and tell her—oh! if I thought she *did* miss me——" her colour changed. She was going to add, "I would not wait an hour before going back to her," when the recollection that if Mrs. Herne objected to her as a daughter-in-law her presence there could not but be undesired, came in time to check her; "but I do not think she does," she added instead. "She would rather I were away at present; and—and I dare say it is better."

She rose as she spoke. The restraint on her feelings was growing too horrible to be borne. In her dread of breaking down she almost wished that he would go quickly. "Good-

bye," she said, holding out her hand, and Robin took the word as his dismissal.

"Good-bye," he repeated, his eyes and voice full of an angry passion which could no longer be controlled, "and God bless you, Ellice. I don't blame you for leaving us or changing your mind. He's a better fellow than I; and who but a selfish hound would want to tie you to a falling house? Don't think it churlish of me if you do not see me again, however; I love you so well I can't bear it—I——"

He was standing before her, her hand in his, but turned suddenly away with a great choke in his voice. How it happened that the next moment Ellice was in his arms, held there tightly with her innocent lips pressed against his, which were raining passionate kisses on them, God, who knows what women's hearts are made of, could better tell.

"Robin, Robin," cried the poor child, all her resolution broken down at last, "I never left you. I was sent away. It is not I who have changed. Oh! Robin, don't cry, don't! please don't. I love you. Don't you *know* I love you better than all else?"

CHAPTER VII.

“ I FANCIED, Lisa, that we were of one mind on this subject.”

The pale October sunlight was falling through the elm-trees in Lord Holland's park, and striking the library window of No. 3, Phillimore Gardens, across Mrs. Devereux's little strip of garden. One long ray stooping on the fair head of a girl seated in the window, turned the flaxen locks to gold, and, travelling further, now lit, now left in shadow, the stalwart figure of a young man pacing up and down the carpet in front of her with impatient strides. Without, the sparrows were chirping among the yellow sycamore leaves strewn on the lawn; and the crimson leaves of the Virginian creeper made a fiery garland round the balcony, and hung in flickering, ruby-coloured tapestry to the ground. It was a

sunny, peaceful, mellow-coloured day in the open air ; but peace was not the predominant charm in Mrs. Devereux's library at the moment ; for Gordon was just hearing of his cousin's visit, and, truth to say, was sorely displeased, and did not scruple to show it. That Ellice might have kept it to herself, had she been less open with him than she was, was a phase of the matter which he did not pause to contemplate. What vexed him was that it should have occurred at all, and that she should tell him of it, not with annoyance or regret, but with cheeks rosy with blushes and eyes and lips tremulous with a happiness which he could not even understand, and which seemed to him strangely out of place.

"I fancied that we were of one mind," he said severely, "and yet you tell me that he has been making love to you again, and that you—you *encouraged* him !"

And when Ellice was obliged to own that something of the sort had certainly occurred, the young man's brow darkened and an almost unhappy look came into his face. How was he to preserve this precious little adopted sister of his from the snares and perils about her, if she herself took part against his efforts and

slighted his counsels? He had made it a part of his lay-ministry to guard her from the contamination of the world; and if he failed even in that, how could he hope to succeed in the vocation to which he still aspired? Squire Herne's animadversions against her, and his wife's tacit support of them, had filled him with keener pain and indignation than the girl at whom they were directed. *She* was strengthened by a sense of her own innocence and her womanly sympathy with the trouble of those who suspected her; but to him it seemed horrible that even the taint of such a suspicion should have fallen on her head; and he had stood up stoutly in her defence and taken a pleasure in removing her from the house where she had been traduced. That she must suffer for it anyhow he knew; and the more silently and gently she bore the suffering the more tenderly he felt towards her. Ellice, an exile from her guardian's house for honour and conscience' sake, and giving up love and such earthly pleasures rather than in any way wrong those who had wronged her, was a creature after his own heart, a soul walking straight along the thorny road to heaven, and worthy to receive the laurel crown

at the finish ; but Ellice, giving way to her lover's persuasions, yielding to a passion with which he had no sympathy, and which seemed to him mere weakness ; and giving, by so doing, a colour to all that her guardian had said of her, was something widely different, something to be blamed and mourned over ; and it was this very thing that he had feared, this that he had tried to counteract by dropping all mention of her lover ; and doing his best that they should not be brought together.

Assuredly his feelings towards Robin Herne were not those of love at the present moment. It must be remembered that Gordon had, as yet, heard no explanation of the old Hernes' accusations, nor of Robin's seeming fickleness and want of courage and honesty. Lyle and her mother had come into the drawing-room almost immediately after those words of Ellice's, which had raised poor Robin from the depths of despondency to a heaven of joy and gratitude ; and he had gone away shortly afterwards with a whispered promise to come again on the morrow and explain everything. Lyle's keen eyes, however, had seen enough to warrant her asking more, and Ellice, after

all her poor little efforts to guard her secret, was obliged to confess that she did care for Robin Herne and he for her. They were not engaged, she explained with anxious care, and perhaps they never might be ; for he had not even spoken to his parents as yet ; so please, please would her cousin and Mrs. Devereux be so very kind and good as not to talk or tease her about it ? The Hernes had had a great deal of trouble lately, and it was no time to be talking of such things. She was almost sorry that Robin had come to see her on that account.

But though she said so, and tried to feel as she said, Ellice knew in her heart that she was not sorry. How could she be, when she knew that Robin loved her, and when the radiant joy in his face was still in her eyes, and her cheeks and hands rosy from the kisses he had lavished on them in his gratitude ? Happiness is a very infectious thing, and at eighteen, however heavily the heart may have been crushed down, it has elasticity enough to spring up higher than ever again the moment the weight is removed. Robin's hurried whisper that it had all been a mistake, and he would tell her about it when he came

next, was sufficient to set her mind at rest and send her to bed as blithe as a lark, and freer from anxious thought than she had been for weeks past. *He* had said that it would all be right now, and how could she doubt him ?

But unfortunately the morrow was a bank-holiday ; and that well-intentioned marplot, Gordon, taking advantage of it to look up his young cousin, whom he had not seen for some days, chose the unconventional hour of eleven in the morning for his visit, and thus got the start by several hours of Robin, who would not have committed such a breach of the *convenances* had he been even more in love than he was ; so that poor Ellice was soon brought down from her pinnacle of unthinking happiness, and made to feel not a little sorry and ashamed for having indulged in it at all. Gordon's demeanour indeed was so very quenching, that it was some comfort to her to reflect that she had told Lyle that she was not engaged and never might be ; and it was no less so to her cousin when she said the same to him, adding sorrowfully :

" I had told Robin that I loved him when he was happy. I could not say the contrary

now that he is in trouble ; but that is all, Gordon, and surely there is no harm in that."

"Not if it could remain all ; but I should think it great harm if on the strength of that you allowed him to draw you into any sort of engagement without his parents' full and free consent."

"But, Gordon, he would never dream of doing so. Why should you think it of either of us ?" Ellice broke in warmly ; but her cousin only made his little quieting gesture with one hand, and went on unmovedly.

"You must remember that, letting young Herne's own conduct alone, his parents have preferred a very serious accusation against you, and one which can only be disproved by Margaret herself. Until you have that proof I do not see how you can, consistently with decency and self-respect, ask them to receive you as a daughter, or allow their son to bind himself to you. Surely we must think the same on this point at least, Lisa."

And when Ellice answered almost angrily that of course they did, and that if he doubted it she would give him her word that the avowal of yesterday should make no difference in her relations to Robin, he went away more content than he had hoped.

But the bloom of Ellice's newly-revived happiness was gone, rubbed off like the down from a butterfly's wing by a rude finger ; and when Robin came, joyous and exultant, his visit was by no means as pleasant a one as he had expected.

He had pictured Ellice coming to meet him with smiling lips, and nestling into his arms while he told her how it came that he had ever doubted her. Instead, he found her shy and nervous, and even more constrained than on the previous day, though the agitation in her manner and the tenderness in voice and eye breaking at almost every moment through her enforced coldness might have consoled him if he had not been made too indignant to pay heed to it by learning that she did not mean to consider him as engaged to her, or to allow any explanations to shake her in repeating that whatever they might have been in the past, at present, and till Margaret was found, they were only friends—friends and nothing more.

“But, Ellice, surely that is unreasonable,” cried Robin passionately. “I have told you how all the mistake arose, and you own I was not to blame. You accepted me a month ago ;

and though I was resigned to give you up when I thought you had changed your mind or preferred your cousin, now that you assure me that it is not so and own that you love me, I can't understand why you should put me away and refuse to let things remain as they were before. It is cruel to me, love."

"Oh! Robin, I don't want to be cruel to you," said Ellice tremulously. And then he took her hands in his and answered:

"Say you are mine, then; that you will be my wife as soon as I can make a home for you, and that nothing and no one shall take you from me. Say it, Ellice, my own darling, and make me happy. I want a little happiness just now."

But hard as it was *not* to say it, and to deny him anything with his warm hands holding hers, and his loving eyes looking into her face for the answer she longed to give, Ellice shook her head.

"I cannot do it. Dear Robin, I would give anything to make you happy; but this would not be right—not until your parents have given their consent. They have only you now; and . . . and, Robin, I *will* not marry you unless they wish it."

"But I tell you they will wish it. It was only that they thought Gordon——"

"Gordon!" interrupted Ellice, half laughing, and not blushing at all, to her lover's great satisfaction, at the idea. "So you have told me; but it seems too ridiculous that any one could possibly think such a thing of Gordon and me. And *you* to do it too!"

"After all, love, you gave me good cause by for ever praising him up to the skies as you did; and cousins do fall in love sometimes, little girl."

"Not cousins like we are. Don't say any more about it. I hope he will never hear that such a notion has ever entered any one's mind. Of course I praised him; he is my own dear brother, but you——"

"Yes, I? Why do you stop, Ellice? Go on; tell me what *I* am to you," cried Robin, making another effort to possess himself of the little hand; but this time Ellice kept him off, and answered:

"You are my best friend, Robin, and I am yours till Margaret is found, or your parents wish me to be something more."

Robin got angry again.

"We have not found a trace of her yet," he

said. "It may be months before she chooses to let us know where she is. That is why I have not liked to trouble my parents with my affairs, but now——"

"You will not! Oh, Robin! it would be horribly selfish, and surely we can wait."

"*Wait!* And for how long? I tell you what it is, Ellice, you might as well tell me to give it up altogether." And when Ellice, though with tears in her eyes, said she would rather do that than give the Squire or his mother cause to think any worse of her than they did already, Robin declared that she did not love him at all. It was her cousin who had put her up to this. She always minded *him*, and did what he bade her. After all, she cared for Gordon more than she did for any one else, or she would not let him rule her as he did; and as for himself (Robin), he wouldn't stand another man coming between him and the woman he loved, let him be brother, parson, or whatever he liked to be. . . . He went away very shortly after this in a frame of mind by no means enviable, and would have left the house, only Lyle, who happened to be coming upstairs as he was going down, insisted on his coming into the library to have

a cup of five o'clock tea with her mother, greeting him with such winning cordiality that Robin could not be churlish enough to decline ; and once inside the pretty little book-lined sanctum, flowers within and without, a cup of strong tea beside him, and a pretty, dark-eyed young woman regaling him with pleasant talk of the sort which makes a man pleased with himself and all about him, Robin felt the dark cloud over him gradually softening and fading away. By-and-bye, Lyle slipped out of the room and returned with Ellice, the latter looking indeed as if she had been crying, but trying to smile, and so wistfully gentle in her manner towards himself, as though trying to make up for her cruelty, that the young man could not help feeling as if his case was not so desperate after all, and as if he somehow owed to Lyle the change in his sensations.

“ It is awfully kind of you to make me so welcome here,” he said to her at leaving. (Somehow people always spoke as if it were *Lyle's* house, not Mrs. Devereux's.) “ I'll try not to abuse your good-nature, but please give me a hint if I do ; for yours is such a pleasant house, and a man only staying at a London

hotel is so lonely, that I may trespass too often."

Lyle put out her hand to him smiling. She had very white, regular teeth, and many men, Robin included, thought her smile an uncommonly pleasant thing.

"I don't think you can do that, Mr. Herne. We are very glad to see you, or any friend of my cousin's." And then she added in a lower voice: "She has told me about you; I hope you don't mind, for I wish you every success. Indeed, I don't understand what she hesitates about."

"I wish you would tell *her* so then," said Robin, reddening very much, as was natural, but trying to put a good face on it; and Lyle nodded in assent so cheerfully, that as he went away he pronounced her a "very jolly sort of girl, no nonsense or affectation about her, and yet so feminine;" he only hoped she would be able to counteract that prig Maxwell's influence over his dear, scrupulous little Ellice.

But the days that followed were not encouraging to this hope. Ellice was obstinate in her refusal to look on him in any other light than a friend, or to allow him to "have

it out with the old folks," as he styled it, quoting Gordon as to the unsuitability of forcing such matters on their attention till Margaret was found; and the end of it was, that instead of going down to the Croft, he remained dawdling on in London, persuading himself that he was carrying on the search for his sister, but really haunting the Devereuxs' house, and trying to tire out Ellice's resolution by the effect of his continual presence. Gordon, on his part, objected strongly to this; called it taking advantage of his cousin's orphanhood and her friends' hospitality, talked about "ungentlemanly persecution," and seized an early opportunity for reminding Ellice of her desire to leave the Devereuxs, and urging on her his scheme of the *crèche*. Mrs. Winstanley, the lady who had given up her house and time to this labour of love, was greatly in need of a young lady to assist her; and though a member of the Church of England herself, she was a cousin of Father Bertram's, and would give a warm welcome to any one recommended by him. Ellice would find it a peaceful and useful home, and could stay there as long as she liked; all of which was very true, and yet Ellice hesitated, and asked him

if it could not wait a little. She would rather not decide just yet. The fact was, she knew very well that Robin would look on such a step as a tacit expression of her indifference to himself, and a severing of the last link between them. He would think she did not love him, and would be cruelly wounded. Even as it was, he was angry and dissatisfied with her; and to rouse Gordon's displeasure into the bargain, as she was doing by her irresolution, was very hard. She did not know how to please either, and grew whiter and thinner daily from distress of mind.

If at this time she had had any woman friend to advise or help her, it would have been a great comfort to the young girl in her perplexity; but Mrs. Devereux, wrapped up in fat, contented selfishness, was the last person in the world to whom she could have spoken on any subject involving her deeper thoughts and feelings; and Lyle, to whom she did speak—well, Lyle was a mystery, and not easy to understand. She was very fond of drawing Ellice out on the subject, and discussing it in a pleasant, sympathetic way, which somehow made the poor child feel as if her cousin thought the whole affair very

slight. Lyle talked as if she thought her quite right to hold out against Robin, said men were always selfish and unreasonable; but there was no need to worry one's self about their whims and humours. He would come round by-and-by, and she was much wiser to go by Gordon's judgment, whatever it was, as being more impartial. Mrs. Herne would value her all the more afterwards for not being too easy. Now all of this was very soothing to Ellice at the time, and coming from a girl used to the ways of the world, and more than four years her senior, carried a weight with it which strengthened her in her course; but why, if Lyle thought thus, should she so often bring up the subject of generous uncalculating devotion when Robin was present, and the nobleness of sacrificing all secondary interests and worldly considerations for those one really loves? Robin used to warmly acquiesce in these opinions and Mrs. Devereux to differ, saying Lyle was a foolish girl, and that she hoped she wouldn't carry out her theories herself; and a discussion used to ensue, which seemed to Ellice like a sort of tacit condemnation of her own prudence and coldness, although Lyle used to assure her afterwards that

nothing that was said had the smallest reference to *her*, and that she didn't know how the subject had cropped up, for of course the cases were entirely different, etc. But if so, why was Robin always having half-whispered conversations with the elder Miss Devereux at present ; and why did he always come away from them more hurt and angry with herself than he had been before ? Ellice could not understand it at all. Surely it was enough that Lyle should nearly always manage to absorb Gordon when he came, and talk to him about churches and schools, etc., till she had imbued him with the idea that only her devotion to her worldly old mother prevented her from becoming a sister of mercy on the spot. It was in the midst of all this perturbation and trouble and jealousy that Robin received a letter from his mother containing tidings of importance.

She had news of Margaret, and wanted him to come down to Herncroft at once !

The girl had not written to her mother, but a note in her handwriting had arrived at the Croft for Ellice, and Mrs. Herne had opened it, thinking, she said, that as she knew it was from her missing child, she might be excused

for doing so. It was only a few lines, without date or heading, to say that she was alive and quite well and safe. Some one had told her that if people were thought to be dead it made great trouble sometimes, and she did not want her parents to have any more worry on her account. She hoped they were being well taken care of, and she would never bother them any more. She knew they couldn't forgive her for running away, and would never want to see her again.

Mrs. Herne did not enclose the letter. She said "father" wouldn't let it out of his sight, so Robin must come straight down and see it. They had tried to make out the postmark, but it was almost obliterated, and of course they could not show it to any one else. Perhaps his eyes would be more successful.

Robin came to the Devereuxs' house with this in his pocket, and in a great state of excitement. He was going off by the next train, and wanted to persuade Ellice to let him take advantage of this long-looked-for scrap of news to tell his parents of his love for her. Her great argument hitherto had been, "How can you talk of such things, or want to trouble them with them, when we do not even

know whether poor Margaret is alive or dead!" and now that this doubt was at rest he hoped to vanquish her other scruples. It was, therefore, a great disappointment to find that Ellice was out, and he showed it so plainly in his face and voice, that Lyle, who was at home, persuaded him to come in and wait her return; and seemed so gentle and sympathetic, that he soon found himself confiding his object in coming to her, and receiving warm assurances of her hopes for his success.

"She really *must* not trifle with you any longer," Lyle said. "I will tell her so, as indeed I did when she misled poor young Mr. Elmslie, a friend of ours, by her manner. Ellice is a dear little thing, and likes to be admired; but sometimes I do not understand how she can coquette with people as she does. It does not seem true or—womanly. But then I forgot, she is not English, and every one says American girls are not *quite* like we are."

"Who is Mr. Elmslie?" said Robin. "I never heard of him before, and I don't think Ellice means to coquette with me. It is that Maxwell—I am sure I wish English girls

were more like her." And then he remembered himself, and added politely, "But there are not many like you. I don't know how to thank you for all your goodness."

"It doesn't deserve thanks," said Lyle, as sweetly as if she didn't understand the addenda. "I think I like being 'good' to you, Mr. Herne," and Robin took up her hand and kissed it.

"You are an angel," he said impetuously. "Can't you make *her* like it too?"

There was a slight rustle at the door of the ante-room, so slight that Lyle, who heard it, did not turn her head, or she might have seen Ellice's face, paler than ordinary, just disappearing from view. She had come upstairs from her walk, and had reached the door of the ante-room just in time to see the kiss given, and hear the first four words which accompanied it. For one second the ground seemed to heave under her, and she felt as if she were going to faint, so terrible was the idea suggested by the scene thus suddenly presented to her. Almost in the same breath, however, she recovered herself. Pride and wounded delicacy came to her aid, and without a word she glided noiselessly away and sought the shelter of her own room.

Utterly unconscious of the witness to his little bit of sentiment, Robin stayed another ten minutes in the hope of seeing his truant sweetheart before leaving. He had delayed till the last moment consistent with catching his train; and Lyle was so tenderly commiserative of his disappointment that she came out on the stairs with him to say good-bye. The servant, who was going to open the door, heard her last words, and looked up at her in surprise.

"I beg your pardon, miss, but Miss Ellice is in. I let her in myself a quarter of an hour ago, and told her Mr. Herne was in the drawing-room. I thought she had gone up to you."

"Ellice *in!*" repeated Lyle. "Are you sure, Tylon? Mr. Herne, she *cannot* have understood that you were here."

"Oh yes, miss, for she asked me in which room," said the boy; and Lyle murmured:

"It is incomprehensible. Can she have meant it for a joke?"

Robin had turned very white.

"It doesn't matter," he said hoarsely. "I suppose she didn't care to see me. Thank you all the same, and good-bye. I shall miss

my train if I delay;" and then he was gone, and Lyle went serenely back to her morning's practising. She was not sorry that Ellice had not made her appearance; but she herself had nothing to do with that, and would probably hear the explanation when she next saw her cousin, and have the pleasure of telling her that Robin had come to say good-bye before leaving town, and how pleasant and conversational he had been.

But when the dining-room bell summoned them all to lunch, Ellice among the rest, there was something about the girl which puzzled her cousin. Her face was perfectly colourless, and there were dark lines under her eyes, but her manner was as calm and cheerful as possible, and when told that she had missed seeing Mr. Herne before he went off to Downshire, she only answered:

"Ah, he is gone then?" so coolly, that Lyle did not feel encouraged to tease her, and went on instead:

"He waited some time in the hope of seeing you, but was afraid of missing his train at last. They wanted him at home on some family business."

"I hope he was in time," said Ellice quietly.

"It was kind of him to wait." And then she turned to Mrs. Devereux with some comment on their morning's shopping, which started the matron off on a dress discussion. Lyle did not understand her at all.

But that night Gordon received the following note :

3, Phillimore Gardens.

" DEAREST GORDON,

"You were quite right about the *crèche*. I think I should be much better there, and only wish to get it settled as soon as possible. I do not think my guardian could object. If he does I can leave it again. Will you therefore see Mrs. Winstanley for me, or, as to-morrow is a half holiday, take me to call on her. I think she will find me useful. At any rate I will do my best that she shall. Don't delay about it, dear brother,

" Your loving

" ELLICE."

CHAPTER VIII.

UNEXPECTED letters seemed in fashion about this time, for the day after Robin's departure one in a woman's hand arrived at his club for him, and might have lain there till his return but for an accident.

His visit had been fruitless in one sense, for no amount of examination could make more of the postmark than that the last syllables were "——hampton." What went before was too faint to be legible, and as Margaret had given no clue to her whereabouts in the interior, it might be Littlehampton, Southampton, or any other town ending in those letters with equal likelihood. As a matter of fact it was Roehampton, Tom Starling having a job at that place, and having been trusted to post it there ; but no one could guess that, and Robin was almost as much irritated as

disappointed at the worthlessness of the clue from which he had hoped so much. But it was not worthless to the old people. To know that Margaret was alive and "quite safe and well"—the poor mother repeated the words over and over again with ever freshly flowing tears of thankfulness—was the next best thing to hearing that she was found; while the Squire, pillowed up in the armchair to which he was now able to be moved, and holding the letter fast in his shaking hand, said, looking up with a wistful humbleness which was infinitely touching:

"Robin, I must ha' been gruesomely harsh to my lass fur her to fear me so. '*Couldn't forgive her*'! Why, lad, she's but to come here an' lay her head upon my knees, an' never a word o' anger should she hear from that day forrard. Surely thou'lt be able to fin' her now, Rob; surely thou wilt!"

And Robin could but promise that he would try his best, and feel rather conscience-stricken at the thought that since his meeting with Ellice his efforts in that direction had certainly relaxed. It was a comfort then to recollect that it was not so with that grim, meddling fellow, Gordon Maxwell, who from

the first had taken up the matter as if it had been his own sister he was seeking, and spent many of his evenings prowling about the embankment and bridges, and making inquiries in all sorts of places, likely and unlikely, where he thought Margaret's errant feet might have wandered. Once he had caught sight of Nino Gerrant in the crowd coming out of a theatre, so knew the latter was in London; but the artist had not returned to his old quarters, and neither Gordon nor Robin knew where he was to be found.

The latter stayed two or three days at the Croft. His presence did his father good, and Mrs. Herne urged him to remain as long as he could. A fresh advertisement had been put in the *Times*, and Robin telegraphed to his club for any letters which might have come for him there, on the chance that Margaret might also have written to him at that address. It was owing to this latter thought that on the following day he received the epistle to which I have alluded, and which was so important in its contents as to take him back to London as fast as the next train could carry him.

It ran as follows:

"I saw you in the street the other day, and overheard your conversation with a young man you called Maxwell. It seems that you are still seeking for the girl about whom you spoke to me in the train going to Paris. You may therefore like to know that she is in London, and *not* with Gerrant. He saw her in the Park yesterday, and has been trying to find out her address since. Perhaps he has done so by now. I hope not, so write this to let you know. A line to the Post-office, Edwardes Terrace, Kensington, will find me if you want further information. In return, promise me that, should you recover her, you will take her safely out of his reach.

"Your Friend and Fellow-Traveller."

The very idea of Margaret being exposed to fresh peril was enough to make Robin feverishly anxious to be gone; and it will be easily believed that his parents did not try to detain him. He had, however, to wait a couple of hours for a train, and during that time something was said of Ellice, who had not been previously mentioned. Robin's feelings had indeed been too sore and hurt at her late conduct to allow him to allude to her, and he

had meant to go away without doing so, when Mrs. Herne said :

"It was a strange thing that Maggie's letter should ha' been written to Ellice, Robbie, wasn't it? Even if she were afraid o' our anger, there was *you*."

"Yes, but I might have been away from home," said Robin ; "and of course she took it for granted that Ellice was here taking care of you, and being taken care of, as she should have been. I think it was very natural."

"Ah! she didn't guess as Ellice were a deal more comfortable with her fine London relations than lookin' arter a poor old man an' woman like us," said Mrs. Herne sighing, and Robin felt himself grow suddenly warm and indignant.

"You forget, mother, that you sent her away, and she frets terribly about it, and is not at all more comfortable. I think you would be sorry to see how pale her face has grown. Maxwell says it is London air ; but she looks really ill."

"Pale an' ill, does she?" cried Mrs. Herne quickly. "Why, what ails the child? Brother Harry would never forgive me if she were to

go an' get sick ; an' her mother was al'ays delicate. But 'twasn't *I* sent her away, Robbie. She wanted to go wi' Gordon, or he wanted her wi' him. 'Tis all one with them, you know."

"No, I don't know," said Robin shortly ; "and if you mean that you still think they are in love with one another, you're quite wrong, mother. That was all a mistake, beginning in my own jealous folly ; and I should have come or written to you to set it right with you before now, only she wouldn't have you troubled about her when you had so much on your mind already."

"But, Robbie boy, I don't know what you mean. I thought we all knew as Gordon an' Maid Ellice were sweethearts. Why, there's no mortal she's so fond of. You must ha' heard her speak up o' her love for him yourself, though she never would say out as they were engaged."

"Because they were not. She was brought up with him from a baby, and loves him like a brother ; worships him, in fact, as lots of little sisters do their big brothers. She did not even understand that we had given a different colour to her affection for him till I

told her, and then she would hardly believe me, it seemed so absurd to her. Besides, it seems the fellow has been intended for a parson ever since he was a baby, and is only waiting to be one now till Uncle Harry gives his consent; and in his church the parsons don't marry, so Ellice would as soon have thought of falling in love with her grandfather or the Patriarch of Venice. She seemed to think there was something positively wrong in the idea."

"Then I don't," said Mrs. Herne, whose face looked utterly bewildered. "I don't say curates ought to go marryin' off in the way they do, an' gettin' a dozen children out o' hand wi' nothing to feed 'em on; but there's no man wants a wife like a parson, when he *can* keep one, an' just see how the girls al'ays set their caps at 'em! It seems something selfish an' unsociable like for a man to have a house o' his own, an' not ask a woman to share it wi' him, an' when there's such a lot o' girls goin' a beggin' too. Besides it stands to natur', a man can't keep himself tidy, an' a parson ought to look clean an' well set up. . . . But, Robin, surely you're mistaken, lad, for when we spoke to her about it she never

said it wasn't so, or that she only cared for him like a brother; but cried, an' begged us not to set ourselves again her, for 'twas only settled that day, an' she hadn't thought we'd be vexed, but she couldn't tell us sooner; while he—why, he just flew out at what he called our misjudgin' her, an' took her away wi' him as though she'd been his wife already."

Robin's face showed a good deal of emotion. The image of poor little Ellice crying and pleading for her love to himself, the love which he had begged her to keep in her own heart, but which she was too true to deny, made him feel anything but comfortable.

"I am sorry *I* was not here at the time you speak of," he said, with a great effort at calmness. "Mother dear, it is very simple and easy to explain, for it has been a mistake on both sides. She—they both thought you were alluding to some one else, some one who *did* care for Ellice in the way you attributed to Maxwell, and who had only told her so that very day. She was too loyal to him to disown him, but it was cruel and unjust to expect her, a shy girl, to stand up and say to three people, all equally unjust to her, what it was the other man's part to say for her."

“And why didn’t he then?” cried Mrs. Herne, beginning to look unhappy. “God knows I never meant to be hard on the lassie, or unjust either. Wasn’t she gettin’ like one o’ my own to me, an’ I like a mother to her every way? ’Twas *that* made me feel sore at her shuttin’ up her confidence again me about Gordon; an’ mind, Robin, ’twas thee put that into my head an’ no one else. How was I to tell o’ any other lover, an’ she seein’ scarce a man i’ these parts, wi’out you mean the curate, an’ he’s a poor, half-starved body, nigh as bad as a Romanist himself, an’ seems to think as stomachs wasn’t made to put food in, nor women for good men’s wives. . . . But there! I could ha’ vowed there was no one for Maggie—poor lost lamb! to come across, an’ she found some one. Well now, the poor Ellice-child! I *am* grieved, for I mind the way she looked from father to me bewildered like when he was speakin’ his mind to her, an’ then hid her pretty face on nephew Gordon’s arm as if she’d no one but him to stand by her; an’ I so anxious about Maggie, I was only worritted by them. Do ’ee think I ought to ha’ thought more o’ her, Robin lovey? Surely it’s loth I’d be to be

harsh to any one, an' least o' all to a wee lass like that; but then came Maggie—*our* child's letter, an' poor father's stroke, an' it all seemed so bad wi' her knowing about Maggie's lover, an' hushin' up her own affairs, I was fare glad, an' I own it, when she willed o' herself to go away."

"And it cut her to the heart to know that you were. She never would have gone otherwise," cried Robin indignantly. "Mother, will you believe me, Ellice was as innocent with regard to Margaret as about the other matter. She would have given anything to have stayed with you, and been a comfort to you; but you wanted to be rid of her, and she could not force herself upon you. She could only go away with the one person left her, and trust to time clearing her with you. Poor darling! I tell you I feel utterly ashamed when I think of it. Margaret has all of us to stand up for her, but *she* had no father to rage on her account, or mother to cling to. She was left to our care, and we turned her off to seek the kindness from strangers which she had a right to have found with us."

In his strong excitement, and with the depths of his love stirred up to red heat by

the force of his own words, Robin forgot himself, and spoke more harshly than he meant. The next minute he was bitterly sorry for it, and was on his knees by his mother, hugging her, and trying to comfort her, for she had turned from him and broken out crying, with her face hidden in her hands.

"Mother, mother, forgive me! I didn't mean to hurt you. Forgive me," he said, kissing her plump, work-worn hands again and again in his penitence, and by-and-by Mrs. Herne found voice to speak.

"Nay, lad, I'm not angered wi' thee. Maybe thou dost but speak the truth, only I never thought o' it i' that way, an' it cut me that my own son should speak so bitter to his mother, an' she not have a word to say; for seems to me, Robin, we ha' wronged the child as was left to us, an' yet the Lord knows we never meant it. Many's the time I've missed the pretty face an' blithe ways o' her since she left, an' wondered to think how she got so tangled roun' my heart the short time she'd been wi' us; and even father, for all he's so set again' her, had got so usened to her ways o' brightenin' the house wi' her pretty work an' flowers (as poor Maggie never seemed

to think of) an' her readin' aloud to him—for my eyes aren't as young as they were, Robbie, and I can't read off smooth an' slippy like she did—that I know he felt it too. But 'twasn't me proposed that she should go, lad, don't 'ee say that. 'Twas Gordon for her; an' why did he, if she wasn't willing? Surely it would ha' been as easy for him to ha' told me all this, instead o' bouncing off wi' her; an' indeed, I thought it wasn't kind o' her to be wishful to go when, if she'd stayed, we could ha' talked over any little difference we'd had arter the master was out o' danger, an' had it all made clear."

"Of course you could. It was all Gordon's fault," cried Robin, not sorry to find some one on whom the blame might be fairly laid; "and just like his blundering, meddlesome ways. Of course he ought to have found out where the mistake lay, and explained it to you, so that you might have seen that Ellice had done nothing but what was right and good, and innocent, instead of taking up the matter in an overstrained, monkish light, scolding her, poor child! and carrying her off because he didn't think it honourable, forsooth, for her to stay after what you had said. No

one but the little angel she is would have yielded to him and gone away as meekly as she did ; but she never dreamt of resisting him, and he——Well, I won't say anything against him," said Robin, checking himself magnanimously ; " for though he doesn't like me, I can't say that he has had much cause to do so ; and I believe he does care for her, and meant to do right. It was an egregious bit of folly, and has been the cause of all this misunderstanding ; but what can you expect from a sucking parson, with his head always in heaven or the back slums !" and the young man brought his hand down on his mother's knee with an energy which he hardly intended. Mrs. Herne stooped down and looked him curiously in the face.

" Robin," she said a little tremulously, " I don't understand yet. What do you mean by Gordon thinking it more honourable for Ellice to go an' not having cause to like you ? An' who *does* she care for ? To hear you 'twould seem as if—but don't 'ee laugh at the old mother, boy, for her head's not so clear as it was awhile back—as if *you* cared for *her* more than ordinary way."

" And so I do, mother," said Robin, with a

great gulp. It had come at last, and it was wonderful how nervous he felt. "I care for Ellice as men care for their wives, and I hope with all my heart that she will be mine as soon as I can make a home for her."

"Oh! Robbie, Robbie, don't 'ee say that!"

"But why not, mother? Nay then, mammy, dear old mammy, don't cover up your face again!" cried Robin, coaxing her. "Why shouldn't I love Ellice? Don't you own that you do? And isn't she as sweet and lovable as a girl can be? Why, I've cared for her ever since she came here; and only for my absurd fancy about Gordon I should have told her so long before I did. See now, don't look grave and shake your head, and I'll tell you how it was." And having now got well under weigh, Robin told his story easily enough, ending with, "That is why, when she thought you did not approve of it, that she let him take her away. He was bent on carrying her off before I returned that you mightn't say she was encouraging me against your will; and of course I was awfully cut up when I found her gone. I found out all about it when I saw her in London, and I would have told you then, only she, in her

unselfishness, wouldn't let you be plagued about her till Margaret was found and her name cleared. No, nor even let me keep to my engagement to her," cried the young man as proudly as if he had not quarrelled desperately with Ellice on that very score. "She has put you first in everything, mother, and now surely you can't be vexed with her any longer. You've often said she was like a second daughter to you. Could you want a sweeter one, and when she will make me so happy too. . . . There! I hear the horse coming round and I must go. Don't cry, dear old lady; I'm not asking you to agree to anything *now*. I know it's no time for such things, or for troubling father; and if it were, I couldn't afford to marry till I've got a profession; but now that you know the whole truth, give me your blessing, at least, and *something* to say to her. Think how she has suffered all this time."

"God bless you both, children," said poor Mrs. Herne, kissing her son repeatedly before he stood up to go. "I fear me the child 'll never like me again now; but give her my love, Robbie, an' ask her to forgive me for bein' unjust to her, poor little maid! I can't

say more now, dearie, an' you mun be patient; but God grant we may have Maggie back wi' us ere long, an' *then*——”

And with this hope Robin mounted his horse and rode away more cheerfully than he had expected. He knew the battle was as good as won, and he too hoped to be able to find his sister now through the aid of the mysterious woman who had already assisted him.

It is time now to return to that sister herself.

Margaret had gone for two or three days to the Park before Gerrant saw and recognised her: not to see the people, nor the riders in the Row, though to her unaccustomed eyes there seemed countless numbers of them, and poor Fanny took no little pleasure in contemplating the glossy horses curvetting to and fro, and scattering the damp brown earth in showers behind their heels; and the gay dresses of the real ladies and the “shady ones,” as she termed it, who paced up and down, or rolled along in high phaetons or luxurious barouches.

“I al'ays looks to the shady ones for dresses,” she said to Margaret. “Bless you!

it's as easy to tell 'em as chalk from cheese. Look at their 'air an' jools, an' the way they swings about as if the gorgeousest gownds weren't nothink but dirt to 'em. But I've seen some as was the gorgeousest come to rags, an' glad o' a cup of coffee at a stall ; an' I've pinte'd 'em out to Lottie too as a morial not to go arter the ways o' sich like. Took that un for a duchess, did you ? Lor, dear, you don't know nothink o' life. Why, wi' all her grandger an' kerridge, {an' lap-dog, she don't valley the 'alf of a decent girl like me, an' there ain't an old charwoman in our street as wouldn't tell 'er so any day."

Margaret shivered slightly, and turned away. It was not these she wanted to look at, not the jewels or dresses, or fine carriages. These things she had coveted both to see and own once. Now, they seemed like apples of Sodom, dust and ashes, in her mouth, and all she wanted was to get out of the crowd and roll and noise and into the quiet shade of Kensington Gardens, where she could sit down on the fading, leaf-strewn grass, and leaning her back against a tree, try, with closed eyes, to fancy that she was back in her own country home, and that if she opened

them she would see the autumn violets thrusting up their small blue faces between the fallen leaves ; and the brown moors barred and laced with golden gorse, sloping away beneath her feet into the blue, hazy distance. Oh ! to be back there, to breathe the fragrant air for one moment, to hear her mother prattling in her pleasant Downshire dialect to the hens and chick-a-biddies in the farmyard, and go blackberrying among the tangled bushes in the copse below Hardleigh Mill. . . . What would she not give for it now ! And she had gone away and left it all of her own accord !

Sometimes she felt as if she must have been mad, or as if she were mad now, and these narrow streets, this smothering air and hideous noise, and the vulgar, coarsely spoken girls her associates, only the figments of a fevered brain ; but whenever the idea came to her to break from them and find her way to a railway station, whence she could persuade the porters to send her back, somehow, anyhow, to her native home, then too arose the conviction that her exile was not only real but binding. She *could* not go back now, back to the place where probably the story of

her flight was still buzzed about as a choice bit of gossip in the village, where the vicar's wife was shaking her head over her in hopeless condemnation, and Miss Pelter shrugging up her skinny little shoulders, and whispering the last rumour going in italicised interjections; back to the house where she could never hope to meet her mother's smile again, where Ellice, fair, pure-minded Ellice, would shrink away from her, and Robin look down at her in disdain; where—O God! it might be—she might find awaiting her her father's curse.

Her father! Often as the several home-pictures rose before her mind she hardly ever dared to think of him whom, in her silent, wayward heart, she loved best of all; or if his grey head and rugged brow rose before her, she shut her eyes shudderingly, or sprang up and tried by talking and movement to drive away the vision again. Too well she knew his opinion of conduct like hers, and his high ideal of the Saxon maids and matrons, to believe that he would ever consent to look upon her again, or stretch out his hand to her in pardon. No, there was only one of all her kinsfolk whom she would have trusted to

give her grace or kindness now, one whom she had hardly seen or spoken to, and whose few words to her had been sharp and rebuking, the tall, big-boned young man whose presence in the hall had prevented her slipping out to seek Gerrant in the early September morning.

"I remember his eyes now," she thought, "blue, and looking straight into mine as if he knew where I was going, and wanted to hold me back. Ellice used to tire me talking about him, and of how in London he goes about visiting all manner of low, God-forsaken people, and likes them better than ladies and gentlemen. I don't think *he'd* turn away from me. Well, if I get ill again, and am like to die, I'll try to find him out, and ask him to get them to forgive me when I am gone."

"Hester, the ground's soakin' damp, an' I've loads to do at home; 'adn't we better be movin'?" Fanny used to say, at intervals breaking into her companion's musings, till the latter rose with an impatient shake of her shoulders and turned her face southward. She was not very pleasant or sociable to poor Fanny, though in her heart she felt kindly

and gratefully to her ; but Lottie, with her loudness and chaff, and childish vanity, she positively disliked, and sometimes showed it so plainly that Fanny felt uncomfortable about it, and rather as if she had brought a fierce young hawk into her hen-coop, who might at any moment pounce on and rend the pet chicken, and who now occupied the family perch, glooming down on them with ruffled feathers and arched neck. Poor hawk ! if Fanny had only known of its antecedents, and how revolting all the details of Margaret's present life seemed to her, the narrow, noisy, smelling street, the close, frowsy room where they eat and slept and lived, the dingy, rat-haunted closet with the roof sloping down over her face, and nothing but a flock mattress on the floor for a bed, the staircase swarming with filthy children, the loud voices and coarse language, and low, imbruted lives daily brought under her eyes and ears—if Fanny could only have known the sickening repulsion which these things inspired in one so differently reared from herself and her sister as their stranger guest, she might have pitied too much to blame her ; but Margaret's sombre uncommunicativeness shut out all

sympathy from her, and Fanny privately put her down as rather touched in the upper story.

“ Poor girl ! I do b’lieve as she ain’t quite ‘countable,” she said, when Lottie complained that “ Hester’s gloomy manner and short answers made her a regular wet blanket in the house, and Tom said he ‘adn’t no pleasure in coming of an’ evening now wi’ that young ‘ooman glowerin’ at ‘im like a stage-queen, an’ putting a squasher on every bit of innercent chaff.”

CHAPTER IX.

THE two girls were just coming out of the Park one afternoon. It was the third of their visits there, and Margaret was so much better that Fanny had promised to take her to an artist's on the morrow, and see if he wouldn't like to engage her to sit to him, when a gentleman who had been looking at them rather closely for some minutes suddenly crossed the road and stood in front of them.

"So, Margaret!" he said holding out his hands to her with a triumphant smile; "I have found you at last! Fire-queen, where have you been hiding yourself all this time?"

Margaret looked steadily first into his face and then down on his hand before answering. That she was taken by surprise was evident, for she had put her arm through Fanny's, and the latter girl felt the long fingers close so

suddenly on her flesh that she almost cried out with the pain ; but though a dark colour rose in her face she showed no other signs of emotion, and her voice only sounded sulky as she answered,

“I don’t know what you mean. Let us pass, if you please.”

But Gerrant glanced at the shrinking figure, bent head, and shabby clothes of her companion, and did not please.

“Nonsense, Margaret,” he said, coming nearer and speaking in a lower tone. “You are not going to treat me like a stranger now that I’ve found you. I know you’re in a rage with me ; but ’pon my soul you’ve no cause. If you hadn’t been hasty and taken yourself off so suddenly you’d have seen that I was only joking. And you don’t know how I’ve been hunting for you ever since. I declare I’ve hardly eat or slept from the anxiety of it. Come, my queen, don’t be so cruel to me.”

He tried to throw a large amount of pathos and coaxing into his last few words, and put out his hand again as if to take hers by force ; but Margaret stepped back, eying him in rather a dangerous manner.

"You are not a stranger to me," she said very distinctly ; "I wish you were ; but I do not choose to speak to you in any way ; and if you follow me or try to force yourself on me I will kill you. See here ! you had better let me alone ;" and she thrust her hand into a pocket, drawing out, greatly to Fanny's horror, a big, clumsy clasp-knife. She had it open in her slender brown fingers before the other could stop her.

"La, Hester, don't ! Put it down, do. We'll be 'avin' the perlice next," cried Fanny, clutching at the weapon. As for Gerrant, he only laughed.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "She won't do me any harm. She's not as vicious as she makes herself out, are you, Margaret ? And by the way," turning to Fanny, "it's deuced odd *you* should be with her. Aren't you the eldest Vanning girl ? Why, I haven't seen you for ages. Some one said you'd died off long ago."

"No, Mr. Gerrant, I ain't died yet," said Fanny, not nearly as much affected by the coarseness of the suggestion as was Margaret. "I got inter a kersomption along o' catchin' cold while settin' to Keeley Vanborough fur

'is Lucreetcher ; an' I've never been well enough to set much since, excep' fur the sor-rerful domestic line. There's young Trembles as paints arter Faed, 'e 'ired me awhile back fur a starvin' mother kneelin' over a dead baby with my 'ands up to 'eving ; but there's nothink so tirin' (when you're *not* starvin') as kneelin' an' 'oldin' up yer 'ands ; an' I just went an' fainted on the very fust day ; but——" catching herself up as she saw that Gerrant had his eyes on Margaret's face and was not listening to a word—" all that ain't nothink to you ; an' I don't see as my friend, Miss Vaughan 'ere, is any more. *You* goes in fur the robustious school, as Miss Jameson and Kitty Gullick sets fur ; an' Miss Vaughan, she don't 'ave nothink to say to that set. 'Er an' me 'ave got our kerrickters to keep up ; an' seems to me as kerrickters 'asn't much to say to robustiousness nowa-days ; an' yer loses yer merality as fast as yer gains flesh. That fat gurl as you wos paintin' of last spring, I wouldn't ha' 'lowed a sister o' mine to set along with ; an' I wonder any one would buy the picture of 'er ; but I dare says as it's back in the dealer's 'ands again by now."

"Don't you be saucy," said Gerrant. "You'll come and sit to me fast enough when I ask you, Miss Vanning; and I don't know but I shall want you before long. I'm going to paint a picture of Respectability being married to the Furies. Classical subject, you know. Where are you living now, eh?"

"Don't answer him, Fanny," said Margaret imperiously. "Come along," and she tried to pull Fanny away. Gerrant laughed again.

"Fire-queen, why are you so savage when you know how much I care for you, and that I have been breaking my heart about you ever since you left me that way? What has made you so cruel? Have a little pity on me, for on my honour I only want to set myself right with you and serve you. Do you know," in an undertone, "that you are looking more beautiful than ever, and that you ought not to be rambling about with girls of this class? It isn't safe, and you can't really like it, Margaret."

"I like anything better than you," she answered defiantly; "and I am quite safe both from you and every one else. I can take

care of myself, Nino Gerrant, and if you don't let me alone I will show you how by calling that policeman who is looking at us now;" and there was so much determination in her face that Gerrant saw she meant it. He drew back with a careless smile.

"You won't do anything so foolish, Fire-queen. Policemen don't take gentlemen into custody for saying 'how-d'-you-do' to their country acquaintances. If you're bent on going home now, however, I won't stop you; only don't think I'm going to lose sight of you again. I care a great deal too much for you, and you would have a right to blame me if I didn't. Good-afternoon, Miss Vanning. There's my address for the picture I want you for;" and he held out his card to Fanny; but her sharp eyes had seen the gleam of two big silver pieces under the pasteboard, and she made no effort to take it.

"Thank you, Mr. Gerrant; but I'd be sure to lose it, an' I can find out yer studiar from some o' yer friends as Lottie sets to, along as I want it. Good-mornin'!" and taking Margaret's arm she walked rapidly away. Gerrant let them go a little distance, and was then preparing to follow when he checked himself.

"They'd be sure to see me," he said, "and double and wind about, and play no end of tricks to throw me off the scent. Besides there'd be no good in going till she's had time to come out of her tantrums. Take a woman in the rebound—I'll write to her to-night; and, let me see, I saw the girl Lottie sitting to old Matherson on Friday. He'll know their address. By George, what glorious eyes Margaret has! I believe I shall end in making a fool of myself about her altogether. She looks more fascinating than ever in this sort of mood." And he was turning back into the Park, a meditative smile on his lips, when checked by a hand suddenly touching his elbow.

A pale, sickly-looking woman, rather nicely dressed, and with a quantity of nut-brown hair shading her hollow temples, was standing beside him; and Gerrant's face went pale at the sight of her.

"Alice!" he exclaimed, a muttered expletive into the bargain telling of his surprise, "*you* here! Why, where in Heaven's name did you spring from?"

"I was in Paris last, Nino," she said evasively; and Gerrant gave vent to another oath.

"It was you then, and I was right. Do you know I thought I saw you ; but I couldn't find you anywhere when I inquired."

"Did you inquire?"

"Upon my honour, yes. You were at the railway-station with a man, a young English fellow. Ask him if I didn't badger him for your address. He wouldn't give it me though."

"He did not know it ; and then you nearly killed him—a lad half your own size—for trying to get another woman from you. You are growing a very bad man, Nino."

"Did you stop me to tell me that, and begin moralising on it?" he asked sullenly.

The woman's manner softened in a moment.

"No, Nino ; I am not going to quarrel with you. It is so long since we met that I would rather not ; but I want to talk to you. You—you won't refuse me that after all that has been between us."

"No, why should I?" he answered, with an affectation of ease and cheerfulness which did not in the least impose on her. "We didn't get on well together ; but I was very glad when I heard you were recovered and out of that place, and would have come to see you if

I'd known where you were. Look here, I'll call a hansom, and we'll go and have some lunch somewhere. I'd say at my rooms, but bachelors' dens are too untidy for ladies. There, Alice, I know you're not going to be foolish enough to say anything. *That* was all a mistake of yours; but I'm always glad to see you, for 'auld lang syne's' sake."

"I can go to old Matherson's after I've got rid of her," he added in his own mind.

* * * * *

Hardly a word passed between the two girls as they scudded along homeward. Fanny looked behind her several times to see if they were followed; and, though no sign of Gerrant was visible, suggested, "We'd better turn to the left 'ere, Hester; it'll take us a good bit roun', but it'll throw 'im off the scent," and another time turned into a mews and twisted Margaret out again by a narrow back yard with the same intent. Gerrant had not miscalculated the city girl's sharpness; but with all delays they got home at last, and then Margaret spoke for the first time.

"Thank God!" she cried out in a hoarse, trembling voice. It was the first prayer she had uttered since leaving home, and Fanny

shut the door, drew the bolt across it, and looked at her keenly.

"Hester," she said, "I'm thinkin' you've played me false, an' I don't like it. What 'ave you got to say fur yourself?"

Margaret looked up at her. She had thrown herself into the moth-eaten old arm-chair where so many hours of her convalescence had been passed, her arms hanging down on either side and her lips apart, breathing heavily as if from fatigue or the repressed agitation of the late scene. Her eyes had a half-bewildered look as she turned them on Fanny's face, but she made no answer, even to ask what the latter meant. Perhaps she did not take in the words sufficiently; only when Miss Vanning, irritated by silence which seemed like a confession of guilt to her, repeated her complaint in stronger terms, and with sundry strictures on the falsity of her guest's conduct, Margaret rose up flushed and haughty, and answered:

"It is you that are saying things which are false, Fanny Vanning. Yes, false, and very impertinent too. You would not dare to speak so if I were not living here on your kindness; or if you knew——"

"Knew what?" said Fanny as she paused. "Knowed who you are, I s'pose you was goin' to say. Lor! I guessed long ago as you was above our sort 'ere; an' told Lottie so when she felt aggrawated by the hairs o' you. *That's* nothink; for if you 'was the Queen o' Spain, as is a reg'lar bad un, I've 'eard, I'd not 'ave 'ad you 'ere; an' I told you so fair an' open from the beginning."

"And I told you then that you were very impertinent," repeated Margaret angrily. "I am sorry I ever came here. However, I will go now, at once."

She made towards the door as she spoke; but Fanny was between her and it and stopped her.

"Now, don't go an' be so 'asty," cried the elder girl, somewhat shaken by Margaret's loftiness and indignation. "Every one's bound to look out for themselves, an' if I've been too 'ot with you I ast your pardon; but you must own as the way that there Niner Gerrint (as is the fastestest hartist in London) spoke to you 'ad a shady look. Now, be honest, 'adn't it, Hester?—or Marg'rit, or whatever yer real name is! But if so be as you likes to explain it——"

"I don't like," said Margaret shortly. "I have nothing to explain, and I would rather go; so please to unbolt the door."

"That I may let *'im* in, or you out to *'im*?" said Fanny coolly; then as she saw Margaret pale and shrink back with an involuntary shiver at the idea, "Look 'ere, Hester, what's the good o' fightin' with your bread and butter? Some'ow I can't 'elp believin' as you're more on the square than you seems; an' any'ow I wouldn't turn you out *now*, when you've come to me for shelter, not if it were ever so. I ain't quite as onginerous as you seems to think, so you may as well stay, fur all your sharp words to me. Niner Gerrint can't git in 'ere if so be as we keeps the door locked; an' you know you don't know no one else in London to go to. You've told me so all along."

Margaret's heart and colour sank. There *was* no one else whom she knew, nowhere else she could go. Much as she loathed this place and its surroundings, it was a shelter; and if she left it, might she not find Gerrant waiting for her in the street? Her feelings towards him had altered most completely; yet despite the scorn and defiance with which she

had treated him, his face and voice had not lost all their glamour for her, and the knowledge that it was so filled her with an instinctive dread greater than all else. The utter forlornness of her present situation was too much even for the pride and resolution which had held her up so long, and her eyes filled with sudden scorching tears.

"Oh, if I could only go home or die!" she wailed out in a sort of moan. "God help me, I wish, I *wish* I had died in the hospital." And Fanny's kind heart softened to her on the moment. She went up to Margaret patting her on the shoulder, and half-crying too for sympathy.

"Don't now, don't!" she said; "things ain't as bad as all that. You've got *me* fur a frien'; an' I will own it, I've al'ays liked you, an' 'ould be real sorry to let you go. Why, if I'd knowed you was a lady born I'd ha' called you 'Miss' from the beginnin', but it wouldn't seem nat'ral to start now, would it? An' even if you 'aven't kep' quite straight all along it ain't too late to begin now, an' God forbid as I should 'elp to drive you back to it! So don't tell me nothink if you don't like. 'E's an awful bad lot is that Gerrint, an' as got

the tongue of a snake, enough to come roun' twenty girls. They do say as one was too much fur 'im though, an' married 'im—Alice Scott were 'er name; but she died, or he got shut of her some'ow, for 'e 'asn't 'ad no wife since I've knowed 'im." And then having partly succeeded in her effort at distracting Margaret's mind from their quarrel, she went on more rapidly, "I saw you was surprised when 'e spoke to me, an' I daresays you wonders 'ow *I* come to know anythink about 'im; but, bless you! there ain't so many hartists in London but we perfessional models gets to be familiar with pretty nigh all on 'em. I've never sat to Niner Gerrint myself, nor Lottie neither; but I've seed 'im in some o' my men's studiers; while as to 'is knowin' me, they gets acquainted with all our faces as 'as been any time in the trade. Father was a noticeable man among 'em, you know. There's folks as you may 'ear now talking of old Vanning's legs; an' he's sat to more R.A.'s for 'is torso than you could count. A grand torso he had, even when 'e got an old man, an' 'ad to swell 'isself out when he wanted to look big an' dignified. Why, I don't suppose as there's a hartist worth being spoke of as don't

know *our* name. You ask Lottie,"—for at this juncture some one had tried the door, and after a moment's parley, during which Margaret retired behind it, the knife which had already so alarmed her friend in her hand, the younger sister had been admitted.

"They gets enough work out of us," replied Lottie, flinging her hat on to the bed, and depositing a large, wet cabbage-leaf full of winks and a pot of jam on the table. "Look 'ere, Fan, Tom's comin' to tea this evenin', an' them's to give it a relish; so put 'em out o' my sight, or I'll go pickin' at 'em aforehand. I do love winks dearly, don't you, Hester? An' whatever was the door locked for?"

"Reasons," retorted Fanny concisely. "Why shouldn't it be?" but in an undertone she added, "Sht! I'll tell you all about it arterwards." And Margaret, partly hearing and partly guessing at what was said, felt the blood rushing to her face in a hot flood of humiliation. It had been bad enough to hear this poor, common girl talking with equal familiarity and contempt of Gerrant, the man whom *she* had worshipped as a superior being, and had made her idol, to be preferred above

all else, but to have the story of his meeting her, with all Fanny's suspicions and comments thereon, whispered to Lottie in the intervals of getting tea ready, and afterwards confided to Tom Starling, when the affianced couple retired to enjoy a little private communion of spirit on the landing, was a shame and mortification to her beyond all words.

"*That Gerrint!*" she could hear Lottie saying, in answer to something from her lover, "I'm sure you needn't be afraid o' *my* 'avin' anythink to say to 'im. He's a deal too coarse-tongued an' free with his impudence for me. If a man thinks me pretty—an' I s'pose some on 'em do (ha' done now, Tom, will you!)—I likes 'im to tell me so prettily, an' not——(see 'ere, you'll get your 'ead broke, you old owl, if you don't take care. I've boxed Gerrint's ears for 'im afore now, an' I'll do the same for you)."

Poor Margaret felt sick at heart, and covering her face with her hands, prayed as she had never prayed before, that if driven to make an end of herself, to seek a rest in that dark, sullen river which rolled on, turbid and solemn, under the gloomy arches of the bridges and the gleaming gas-lamps along the Em

bankment, that she might not go to hell for it.

Mr. Calthorpe had, in one of his sermons, spoken of deliberate suicides as people for whom there was no hope; but surely if you were well and strong, and had no other hope of escaping from a life too horrible to be borne, God would have pity on you, and let you rest somewhere; not at once, perhaps, or in heaven, but—*somewhere!*

Her face was more hopelessly sombre and her manner more stand-alooft and reserved than usual that evening. Tom Starling told Lottie it took away all his stomach for the winks, and he and his sweetheart were driven by it to sit on the top of the stairs in the dark half the evening in consequence.

“The fac’ of it is, if this goes on, you’ll ’ave to marry me out of ’and, my girl,” said Tom. “Tragedy plays is all very well seen from the gallery, an’ washed down with a pint o’ beer an’ a horange; but I’m jammed if they ain’t too much of a muchness in your own ’ouse all day, an’ every day, an’ evenin’ an’ mornin’ performances inter the bargain.”

Margaret’s demeanour fairly weighed on the young man’s mind, and being in conversa-

tion with a fellow-labourer while taking their noonday meal two or three days later in the yard where they were at work, he could not resist talking about her.

"I'd just like you to see the gurl as is lodging at my young 'ooman's," he said, cutting off a chunk of bread, and carefully depositing a square inch of cheese on the top of it before conveying the double morsel to his mouth. "Fanny Vanning picked her up in the 'orspital an' brought 'er 'ome, as was a senseless thing to do, though Fanny she's a good gurl, an' 'as always stuck to me like a brick; an' there she's been ever since, none on 'em knowin' who she is, nor where she's come from. Fanny says she's a lady born, an' I'm hanged if she ain't hairs enough for a queen; an' my lass vows as she's country reared, an' has never been in Lunnon afore. Maybe 'tis true, fur I posted a letter for 'er once to some un in Downshire; but she's as black as any Spaniard, an' 'asn't a thing belongin' to 'er but what she stands up in; 'an my opinion is as she's run away from a mad-'ouse. Leastways that was my idee, but now it seems as there's one o' them artist gents comin' arter her as knowed 'er afore, an'

But Gordon had not waited to hear the last commendation. He was already out of sight.

"Blest if it isn't gettin' more like a stage-play nor ever!" said Tom Starling.

CHAPTER X.

IT was the third day since Margaret's meeting with Gerrant, and she had not been outside the house since. Fanny had been feeling stronger and had gone forth to sit to one of her old employers, both the previous day and this; and Margaret was obliged in consequence to make herself useful by cleaning the room, cooking her own dinner, and going on with a dress for Lottie, which Fanny was making; besides keeping the kettle boiling against the sisters came in to tea. It was not particularly pleasant work, any of it, to one unaccustomed to household drudgery; and she was such a bad needlewoman, that that which might have been the least unsuited to her became the most irksome. She had twice to unpick a long seam, her head was aching painfully from the closeness of the

locked-up room and want of exercise; but though she had received two notes in Ger-rant's handwriting, she had not opened either, but had crammed them into the fire, poking them down fiercely into the blaze without a moment's pause or compunction. The time had gone by when she used to slip out to get his letters, and carry them away to some green copse or hillside, where she could pore over them and press them to her heart and lips in solitude; but she was too much afraid of herself to dare opening them now.

"I have fallen low enough," she said to herself. "If I were to fall any lower I should go mad and kill some one; and then they would be worse disgraced. I'll try not to do that for their sake. Hush! What's that?"

It was a knock at the front door. Rat-tat-tat! and she knew that the three strokes meant the room she was then occupying. Her heart began to beat very quick, and she stood up and listened; but that was all.

Rat-tat-tat!

"Whoever it was was knocking again; and by straining her ears she seemed to hear some sort of parley going on below. Still she did not move, and presently some one—a woman

by the shuffling step—came stumbling upstairs, tried her door, and, finding it locked, tapped at it.

Margaret made no answer ; only her heart seemed to be shouting in response, it beat so slowly ; and the tapping was repeated more roughly, after which the voice of the woman from downstairs called out :

“ Ah, thin, Miss Vahn, why aren't ye afther openin' or answerin' to me ? I said ye was in, an' then bedad I t'ought it was lyin' I was when ye didn't spake, till I looked through the kayhole. Here's a gintleman wantin' yes.”

It was useless keeping silent any longer if Mrs. Donovan's eye was at the keyhole and could see Margaret's tall figure standing up between it and the light ; but the girl's voice sounded strangely hoarse and faint.

“ Tell the—gentleman I cannot see him.”

“ Indade thin an' I'd not be afther bein' so rude. 'Tis a raal gintleman he is, an' says he wants pertic'ler to see yes. 'Tis a message from yer family he's after bringin'.”

“ The liar, to use *their* name !” thought Margaret with a quick spasm of wrath. Indignation made her voice stronger and clearer as she replied :

"If he has any message he can leave it. I will not see him or any gentleman."

To her utter surprise, some one else answered her this time; not Mrs. Donovan or Gerrant.

"Cousin Margaret, I must see you. If you wish it I will not keep you many minutes; but I have something to tell you of your father; and you would not have me say it to strangers. I am Gordon Maxwell."

The words were hardly spoken before the bolt was shot roughly back, the door opened, and Margaret stood before him, her face pale with a dusky pallor, and her great eyes full of feverish, unnatural light, the same look that he had seen in them when they last met his.

"Gordon Maxwell!" she said with a sort of gasp; then, her face paling still more: "What about my father? Has anything happened to him? Is he—oh! my God, it isn't anything through *me*? Tell me what you have to say."

Gordon did not answer for a moment. It was not the dingy room, the close air and general squalor which took away his voice; he was used enough to these, and had gone into many worse places, both in the pursuit of his

quasi-missionary work among the poor, and in following after some fancied clue to his lost cousin ; but the sense that it *was* she at last who was standing before him, and that he had found her, seemed almost too miraculous to be true. Margaret, however, reading a different meaning in his silence, spoke again.

"Is he—*dead*?" she said, and there was something so terrible and hollow in her voice that involuntarily he reached out his hand and took hers in a firm hold, as he answered :

"No, he is not dead ; he is better. Thank God for it ; but, Margaret, he has been very ill."

It was well he held her hand, for at that she turned exceedingly white and tottered as if she were going to faint. Gordon supported her to a chair and put her into it, looking anxiously at her as he added :

"It was a stroke of paralysis, and at first great fears for his life were entertained ; but he has been out of danger and getting better for some little while now. When last I heard from your mother she said he was able to sit up in the arm-chair most of the day."

He said all this reassuringly, because of her extreme pallor, and of the effect of the

shock which he had, perhaps designedly, given her at the beginning ; but Margaret did not speak, nor did her colour come back. She was trembling in every inch of her body, and her eyes were fixed on him with an expression as though each word he uttered was a confirmation of her own death-warrant.

"*Able to sit up in the arm-chair !*" Gordon, used to the image of the Squire in his far worse stricken and more helpless condition, had said this almost cheerfully ; but to Margaret the words seemed to convey a meaning almost incredible. *Her* father, the strong, hearty man whom nothing tired, and who was never off his feet from sunrise to sunset, a poor invalid shattered by paralysis and barely able to sit up in his arm-chair during the day ! it seemed too terrible to be true : too terrible to be borne if it were her doing.

"When was this ?" she asked at length, pressing her shaking knees together, and steadying her voice by an immense effort till it sounded cold and harsh. "Father was quite well when—when I left. When was he taken ill ?"

"That same night," said Gordon. It was cruel of him ; but he fancied that a little

cruelty would be good for her now. Pardon and kindness might come later. "Your note reached him a little after midnight. It was that which brought on the stroke."

With a sudden movement she sprang to her feet, turning from him and wringing her hands together as she cried out in a sharp, wailing tone :

"Oh ! why didn't I drown myself ? Why didn't I drown myself before I ever heard it ? I wanted to. Why—*why* didn't I ?"

"Because God did not permit you to be so wicked," said Gordon. The wildness in her eyes and voice alarmed him ; but he spoke firmly and quietly. "You would then have known it afterwards when it was too late for repentance, and when your rash act had cut you off from making the little atonement in your power. God in His mercy preserved you from such misery as that. Be grateful to Him for it."

The calm, steady voice soothed Margaret. The fair, passionless face subdued her wild excitement. She hid her face in her hands and leant her head against the window-frame for support. Gordon brought a chair to her, and pressed her gently into it, keep-

ing his hand on her shoulder as he went on speaking :

“ Margaret, I am sorry to have pained you so much ; but if you had inquired—if you had cared to inquire about your parents sooner, you would have heard this and more before. You could not expect that the shock of your leaving them, and in *such* a way, would not have had any effect on them ; or have you not thought of the terrible grief and anxiety they have been suffering all this time while we have been searching high and low for you ? ”

“ I knew they would be very angry,” said Margaret faintly ; but——” a sudden look of surprise flitting across the misery in her face —“ *did* you search for me, Gordon ? ” The surprise was reflected in his face as he answered :

“ Did you think we should not ? Your brother and I have done little else but go here and there, and make inquiries for you since you left.”

“ Robin ! ” and with the word she blushed crimson for the first time. “ I thought he would be back at college.”

“ What, without knowing what had become

of you, and with his parents in such trouble ! You must think strangely of your brother."

"No," she said quietly. "I love Robin. He is always so bright and clever, and I am proud of him. We all are ; but I do not think he loves me. He was for ever laughing at me and used to call me mad and savage ; and when Ellice came he never thought of anything but her. I thought he would have been too much ashamed of me now to inquire after me."

"Then you don't know that he followed you to Havre and Paris, and that in the latter place he met and quarrelled with the blackguard who took you away ? Mr. Gerrant did not tell you that ?"

The colour had died out of Margaret's face again, leaving it whiter than before.

"Did he ?" she cried. "What, dear little Robin met him and quarrelled with him ! What do you mean by that ? Did they . . . fight ? I never heard. How could I ?"

"Ah, I thought even Mr. Gerrant wouldn't think it much to boast of," said Gordon ironically. "Robin struck him, and he, being twice your brother's size, knocked him down and so battered him about the head that he

was laid up for several days ; and when he recovered, the scoundrel had left Paris ; and he could obtain no clue to you."

Margaret was crying bitterly.

"Oh ! if I had only known !" she sobbed, quite broken down at last. "How he must hate me ! And I was not worth it. Gordon, when you see him next tell him I never knew it, I never thought he cared so much for me ; and thank him. He won't want my thanks now, it is true—but tell him I thanked him all the same for being so brave for me."

"You must tell him so yourself, Margaret," said Gordon ; but the girl shook her head with a kind of shiver at the idea.

"No, no, I shall never see him again. I might have done so if Gordon, tell me, did *he*—Nino Gerrant, say anything about me ?"

"Only that he denied all knowledge of you, and said—forgive me for repeating it—that you were not married to him."

He avoided looking at Margaret as he spoke, so whether she changed colour or not he could not tell ; but he heard her draw a long, hard breath before she answered in a harsher voice than before :

"No, I am not married to him. That is why I never went back as I said I would. A person who runs away to be married is very wicked, of course, and I knew they would be very angry with me for it, and perhaps refuse to forgive or see me; but I meant to try all the same. I thought when they knew that it couldn't be undone, and how it happened that I went away, that they might be kind and pardon us. It was not as if I had left them alone, you know; but Ellice was there, and she is such a gentle, willing little thing that I knew she would make them happy till I came back. I am not so bad as you think, Gordon, I did not mean beforehand to leave that way. I was taken by surprise, and I loved him so much that when he said—— But all that doesn't matter now. Nothing matters in that way. When a person runs away and *doesn't* get married no one cares what they meant. That is a disgrace to them and every one belonging to them; and people can't forgive disgrace. I could not. If any one had disgraced me I should have said: 'Die, and I will forgive you;' and I Oh! if I *could* die! If I could only die!"

Her voice broke in a dry, tearless sob

again. Gordon answered her gravely and calmly :

“Pardon me, but I cannot see the smallest difference between the one case and the other so far as the wilful wrong-doing is concerned. The latter person may be more heavily punished, more to be compassionated ; but the reckless imprudence, the previous deceit, the unmaidenliness and disobedience, how are they altered, let the result be what it may ?”

His voice was gentle, but the words were the severest Margaret had ever yet heard. It was the actual running away, the disgrace on her name of which she had thought hitherto ; not the conduct that had led up to it. The latter had over-swept the former, the result blotted out the cause ; but now it all came over her at once ; all that he had said since he came in seemed to ring in her brain and overwhelm her. She rose up in her chair stretching out her hand as if to keep him off.

“Hush ! don’t say any more. For God’s sake go away and leave me. I dare say you are right. I believe somehow that you are good, and that what you say is true, but I can’t bear

it ; and—and it is no good now. Ask them to forget me. That is all I want, and—and please go away.”

“Not without you,” said Gordon quickly. “Do you think I only came here to tell you this, which, perhaps, I had no right to say at all? I came to show you what you had done that you might make amends for it, to take you away with me to the home where your father and mother are waiting for you ; waiting and longing for your coming as they have been ever since you left.”

But he might as well have spoken to the winds. Poor Margaret, blinded by her own sullen indifference of old to the tender side of her father’s character, could only see in him an outraged judge, casting from him the child who had disgraced his name. She could not even believe in her mother’s love and mercy now that she realised all the grief that she had brought on her. The very word “home” only brought up a vision of the familiar faces altered into scorn and contempt at the sound of her name, of the sunny house darkened by her presence. With all her heart and soul she was longing to return ; but dread and humiliation kept her back ; and she com-

bated all his arguments with a kind of despairing obstinacy, telling him that he would not urge them if she belonged to *him*. He would be glad then to send her away and never see her again. He did not know her father as she did, or he would not speak so ; and then she turned on him fiercely and said :

“ See now, you who want me to go back, you would be just the same in their place. If *you* had people you loved and were proud of, would you like to take me now from this hole ?” glancing round her at the dingy room, “ to live with them ? And you have—how could I forget ?—you have Ellice whom I left in my place. I know that you love her. Would you like me to go back to her, good and praised by every one as she is, and go out everywhere with her again, her friend as we were before ?”

For one half second Gordon hesitated. Never perhaps till that moment did he feel how precious in reality Ellice was to him, his one little sister, pure and unspotted and fair in face and mind. It was a struggle fierce as it was short ; but the nobler man within him conquered ; and before Margaret had time to notice his hesitation, he answered fully and cordially :

“Yes; you are right. I love Ellice dearly. She is the one nearest to me on this earth, but my love for her would be less, I should think less of her if I thought she could cease to be your friend because you are in trouble; yes, even though the trouble is your own making, provided you are sorry for it. Come with me and see if I shrink from taking you to her. Oh! she is not where you think her. She is not taking up your place at home, but sharing in your punishment. Your parents suspected her of having connived at your wrong-doing and sent her away; and until you return and clear her she will stay away. You were very wrong to be jealous of her, Margaret; for you had no cause. Your parents thought no more of her than of the most casual stranger the moment *you* were in peril or trouble. They would have banished her to the other side of the world rather than that you should have been vexed by her presence; and Ellice would not have grumbled at it for a moment. There is no one who has grieved for you more or longed more for your return. Come to her. She is in London; not twenty minutes’ walk from you now. Come to her that you may see how glad she will be at the sight of your face again.”

He held out his hands to her as he spoke, a smile, gentler and more tender than any but a very few had ever seen, on his face sweetening and redeeming its plainness ; but he was not prepared for Margaret taking them in both her feverish palms and kissing them passionately. The young man flushed up like a girl.

"Don't be angry with me," she said quickly. "Ellice used to say you were so good, you were nearly a saint ; and I think you are. I am trying to believe what you say, but it is very hard ; for if it is so, I have injured that poor child and lost her her home ; and she cannot but hate me for it as I should have hated any one who had done so by me. Oh ! what a curse I have been to every one when I only thought of myself ! No ; I will not go with you ; but go you to her and tell her that I never meant to hurt her, that I hoped she was at the Croft, and that I am very, very sorry she should have suffered through me ; and then if she will come to me here and is not ashamed of me afterwards I—I will do whatever you like, Gordon Maxwell."

"That is, you will let me telegraph for your brother to take you home," said Gordon, smiling at her ; but Margaret still hung back.

"Not my brother. I could not bear to see *him* now, before my father. Oh! if I were not so afraid of my father. I know how bad I have been to him, but I could not bear that he should thrust me away. Gordon, I will go with you. I will do what you tell me; but won't you—can't you bring me some word from himself first, that I may know if he will have me back?"

Gordon thought for a moment.

"Yes," he said, "it is only a little trouble, and if it will make you easier that does not matter. Margaret, if you will promise me to stay with Ellice till I come back, I will go down to the Croft by to-night's train, break the news to your parents that you are found, and bring you back a message from their own lips to-morrow. Is that agreed?"

"Would you do all that for me? It is very good of you." And, for the first time, he saw a ray of light in her altered face. "You are good," she said again; "and I can't thank you for it. I never can thank people; but tell them *everything*. Let them know all that has happened to me, and all I have done, before you ask them to forgive me. Ah, me! I suppose I must tell it you first."

"Is that necessary? Surely you would not like to do so, Margaret," said Gordon, wondering even in his stern simplicity.

She looked up at him.

"Why not?" she said with something of her old weary harshness, "They may think it worse than it is; and unless you know all, how can you tell *them*? I will never hide anything any more." And then, in a brief, hard way, not looking at him, but like a child saying a distasteful lesson to its master, she told exactly how her acquaintance with Gerrant had begun, and how she had encouraged it till she grew to love him too much for her own strength, and let him persuade her to go away with him. "I think the cold and fever must have dazed my head, or I wouldn't have done it even then," she said drearily. "It seems to me now as if I must have been mad; but when I was in the train, with the cool evening air in my face, it came back to me how *they* would feel at my leaving them without a word; and when we got out at the junction to change for Southampton, I wrote to them, as you know. He did not see me or he would have been angry. All the way in the train he joked and laughed and talked of

what we would see and do in Paris, till it seemed as if my running away was only a joke and nothing to fret about. There were other people in the carriage with us ; and one asked me if we were going to France for a pleasure-trip, and said that she was too. When we got to Southampton he took me straight on board the steamer. It was cold, and I was coughing dreadfully. I had never been on the sea before, and the smell of the boat made me sick. He wanted me to stay on deck, but I felt so ill I went down to the ladies' cabin and stayed there till morning. Oh ! I was dreadfully sick, I thought I was going to die. The woman who had talked to me in the train was there too, and talked to me again. She was vulgar, but very kind ; and somehow she found out that I was running away to be married ; and said a lot about it to me—it doesn't matter what. I was very angry with her at the time, and would not speak to her again ; but when we got to Havre, and he took me on shore to an hotel, I told him he must go and get the license for our marriage at once and I would wait for him there. He quite laughed at my saying so at first, and wanted to make a joke of it, saying we must

put off that performance till we got to Paris ; but the woman had made me angry and my head was aching ; I said we would not put it off at all, and that he must do as I wished or I would go back. Then—you will not believe it—but he made game of me. He said—I cannot tell you all he said, except that he had never asked or meant to marry me at all, and that I had come with him of my own will, and could not go back again. I was in such a dreadful passion, even more at his light, sneering way than his words, that I hardly listened to it all ; but of a sudden it seemed to come to me that though I had cared so much for him, he had never cared for me at all, that he had only made use of me and despised me in his heart ; and in that moment my love for him seemed to turn to hate. I could not utter a single word ; and he thought by my silence that I was coming round ; and began to coax me with pleasant words, saying I was a sensible girl after all, and he would go and order breakfast that we might start directly afterwards for Paris. I only smiled, and he went out of the room . . . I heard him lock the door on the other side——

“There was a window opening out of the

room into the garden. Directly he was gone I slipped out of it, and across the garden, through a little back door into the street. No one saw me, and I walked very fast down a lot of back streets till I came to a little confectioner's. I went in there and asked for a cake, and if I might sit down and rest. They showed me into a little back room, and I stayed there till dusk. I had a sovereign and two or three shillings in my purse, and I would have gone back by the steamer; but I knew *he* would be watching on the pier for me, and I determined to go to Paris instead, and asked the people at the shop to show me to the station. But when I got to Paris I did not know what to do, or where to go. It seemed such a huge place, and there was such a noise, and I was afraid to walk about the streets, and every one spoke French so quickly I could not easily understand them.

"I hung about the station, keeping out of sight and feeling very miserable, until suddenly I saw *him* coming from it. He had followed me by the next train. After that I was afraid to stay longer. I hid myself till he had called a cab and been driven away, and then I made up my mind to go back to

England. Not *home*! I did not dare do that; and he had taunted me with all that would be said of and to me if I did; but to London. I thought I could get something to do there. He had told me once that I could make a fortune as a model, and I said to myself, 'That is what I will be.' Fortunately I had money enough, for knowing I should want more in Paris I had sold my watch and a ring I had to the confectioner at Havre, and they had given me French money for them.

"I got to Charing Cross safely, and then I walked about till I saw 'Apartments' written up in a window in a little narrow street, and I went in and took one. I saw it was very poor, so I thought it would not cost much; and next day I asked some one to show me a picture gallery. I made sure the painters would go there to look at their pictures, and Nino had painted several of me, so I thought if I saw *them* I would stand by one till I saw any one looking at me, as he did when he wanted to paint me, and then ask them if they wished to have me for a model; but I did not see them anywhere, and though people looked at me, I did not know if they were artists, and I did not like to speak to them,

though I went there three times. All this while I had very little food, and my cough kept getting worse, and I had such a pain in my head and side that I could not even sleep. I longed to go home, but I was afraid ; and then I became so ill that I had to be taken to a hospital. The girl who lives here was a patient there also, and when I got better she brought me home with her, and has kept me ever since ; but I have often wished to kill myself, I was so miserable, only I thought if I did I should go to hell. The other day, however, I was out, and I met *him*. He stopped me and tried to make me listen to him, but I got away. I have not dared to go out since, and to-day I thought it would be better to drown myself and end it. Then you came, and—and that is all.”

“*All !*” Gordon repeated, with a gladness in his eyes and voice which her dulled brain hardly comprehended. “That is really all ? You have told me the whole story ? God be thanked ! what misery your parents will be relieved from when they hear it !”

“Did they think it was worse ?” said Margaret, colouring faintly. “Other people would, I know, but they—they might have known

better ; and, as you said, it makes no difference except to me. I have *done* just as wrong in leaving them, and the punishment of it will fall on me and them just the same. Do you still believe that they will forgive me ?”

“ I do not believe—I *know* it,” said Gordon earnestly. “ Margaret, Margaret ! can you see how wonderfully, miraculously good God has been to you, guarding you from evil, and bringing you back to us in safety, and yet doubt in the goodness of His servants, your own father and mother ? Of His own infinite mercy He has saved you, you poor, reckless girl, almost against your own will. Trust to Him then now, and thank Him for it while I go to bring Ellice to you.”

And with a last firm pressure of her hand he dashed off and left her alone.

CHAPTER XI.

ELLICE was by this time established at Mrs. Winstanley's as a companion to that lady in her *crèche* for poor children. In his desire to take advantage of what he considered her good disposition Gordon had, immediately on receipt of her letter, persuaded Father Bertram to accompany him to the lady's house, and had then and there so concluded the desired arrangement, that though he came to the Devereuxs' the next day with a request that Ellice would go with him to call on Mrs. Winstanley, the matter was to all intents and purposes settled, even to the hour of her coming in ; all of which the girl had to break to her relations on her return. She had grown cooler by that time, and it seemed terribly sudden even to herself, and by no means over-courteous to the Devereuxs, though she had

reason to believe that only her presence prevented them from leaving town themselves on a series of visits. But *Gordon* had arranged it, and, needless to say, Gordon's arrangements were unimpeded by any thought of social conveniences or civilities! The thing was to be done, therefore the sooner the better, so where was the good of wasting words over it? and though both Mrs. Devereux and Lyle expressed volumes of surprise and regret at their guest's unexpected departure, the elder Miss Devereux, at any rate, was secretly not ill pleased at it. She had a shrewd suspicion that her cousin might somehow have come in for a peep at that *tête-à-tête* and hand-kissing before mentioned. Ellice's manner afterwards had been certainly very reserved and dignified, not so much as permitting any further conversations on her lover; and probably even if she were gone, young Herne might not think fit to relinquish *his* visits to Phillimore Gardens on his return.

The cousins parted without any sorrow on either side, and with a good deal of constraint on Ellice's. As for Lyle, the perfection of her manner was never to be made appear ill at ease or constrained by the most untoward

of events, and she went through the conventional embraces, promises to write, and hopes that "dear Cousin Lisa" would soon come and stay with them again, with the customary social fervour. I may as well observe, however, that Ellice never did happen to stay there again, nor did Robin resume his visiting at Phillimore Gardens. The house is just as pleasant as ever, and five o'clock tea there just as popular, though late hours and perennial agreeability are beginning to show in a little sharpening about Miss Devereux's cheek bones, and her remarks respecting others of her sex have, perhaps, in consequence, a keener edge; but she is quite as graceful and quite as fascinating as in her nineteenth year, and the only wonder is, as everybody says, that she should not have married well long ago. For my part I wonder at it too. Plainer and duller girls go off every day. That Lyle Devereux should remain single is decidedly mysterious, but nevertheless it is a fact.

Ellice entered Mrs. Winstanley's establishment with a heart even sadder and more sober than that which she carried from her native country. It seemed to her that by this step she had finally parted both with

Robin and the life which, begun on her landing at Southampton, had come to a virtual end on the day Gordon carried her away from the Croft. What was before her she could not tell—whether more changes and further wanderings, or a life of devotion to the work to which the good woman who received her had already consecrated her own. She herself would have chosen the latter had she been given her choice, so weary was she, poor child, of the constant uprootings and transplantings of the last months. Her heart felt too torn and bruised to struggle any longer. A refuge at any price was what she craved. She would not blame Robin even if his allegiance had strayed from her, for had he not often told her that her coldness would have driven any man away but himself long before? though Lyle she did blame, with genuine girlish anger and scorn, for inviting his defection. But, after all, Lyle might have a different code of honour to herself. These English people must be very different to her in their ways of thinking and feeling, or how could she, a girl of nineteen, meaning so well, and inclined to love all about her, have found herself after five months an exile from all belonging to her,

her home and her lover taken away and her lot thrown among strangers. Certainly they were an odd, hard people, these English, loving and true to their own families perhaps, but harsh and careless of all outside. Such a fate could never have happened to her in her own sunny land, and among the warm-hearted people of the south.

Her small face was as meek and pale as an autumn daisy when she arrived at the *crèche*, and Mrs. Winstanley judged her favourably by it, and put the sturdiest and most fractious of the babies into her arms on the spot.

"You look gentle and patient," said the lady, "and as if you wanted running about. These children will give you plenty of exercise for legs and patience too. Let me see how you will do with them;" and Ellice had been doing her best with them for nearly two days when late on the afternoon of the second she was summoned down to the parlour to see Gordon Maxwell, and greeted with:

"Ellice, she is *found*, Margaret is found! I have just left her, with the promise to take you to her. Put on your bonnet quickly, child. I'll tell you all about it on the way."

Gordon had never looked so excited or

spoken so quickly in his life ; and Ellice was almost equally elated. The news coming when she had almost lost hopes of any seemed too good to be true ; and when she heard of the broken-down, despairing mood Margaret was in, and how she had expected Ellice to shrink from and dislike her, the tears gushed from the girl's eyes, and she was as anxious as Gordon to get back to the runaway. Unfortunately, however, Mrs. Winstanley was out, and even when she returned, and leave for Ellice to go was obtained, explanations had to be entered into and Margaret's story told, so as to induce the charitable lady to allow the poor girl to be brought back there for the night ; although, when she understood the matter, she willingly acceded to the request, and kissed Ellice, saying,

"I see I shall lose my companion as soon as I have got her. However, my child, if your duty lies elsewhere do not think of me, but do it readily."

But all this took time, and occasioned a delay which, had it been a little longer, might have led to a serious result.

The front door of No. 5, Shendleigh Street, stood open according to its usual wont when

the cab with the two cousins in it drew up in front of that residence, and they had a vision of two of the female lodgers stretching their necks up the stairs, and apparently listening to something that was going on above them.

"Shure an' it's a gran' lady she must be, fur this is the second gintleman that's afther comin' to call on her the day; but it's quarrellin' *they* are by the soun' of 'em," Gordon heard the one who had let him in in the morning say. He was just helping Ellice to alight, but stopped short at this, and saying, "Stay in the cab, Lisa, till I bring her out to you," went swiftly up the stairs, nearly tumbling over the two lady lodgers and causing them to disappear into their respective quarters with astounding quickness. He did not notice them. Indeed he was too much excited by the sound of a man's voice in the Vannings' room to have thought for anything else.

Rightly enough he guessed that Gerrant was there before him.

The artist stood just within the room with his back to the door, which was half open, and facing Margaret, whose dark face and flashing eyes gleamed out of the shadow beyond where

she stood leaning against the table, both hands grasping the back of a chair as if for support. Gerrant had been speaking persuasively.

"This is such nonsense, Fire-queen," he said. "I *know* that you love me just as I love you, so why should you deny it? You flew into a passion and ran away from me because you took it into your beautiful gipsy head that I didn't care for you. My dearest girl, you never were so mistaken, and if you had only stayed a little longer, if you had listened to reason, you would have seen it for yourself, and saved us both from all the misery we have been through since. Care for you! Why, is not my being here now proof that I care more for you than for any other woman in the world? Is not my long searching for you, the unhappiness I have suffered on your account, enough to make you believe me? Come, *Margherita mia*," and his voice dropped to a lower and more tender key, "tell me that you do, and that you love me as you did in those summer days on the hills when we first met one another."

"*Love you!*" repeated Margaret. If he had hoped to soften her by that allusion to

the hills of her childhood he was mistaken ; for her eyes only took a fiercer glitter. " Listen to me, Nino Gerrant : I *did* love you, I was mad, and I worshipped you till you showed me what you really were. If you had not done that, I might have gone on worshipping you to my dying day. But I am glad you did. Yes, I am glad you did so soon; for it must be bad to be married to anyone one hates as I hate you now. I would not be your wife to-day if you asked me, or if you had a crown to give me ; for there is not an atom of feeling for you in my heart but loathing and contempt. It was you who despised me before. Now, I despise you. Do you hear me ? I despise you ; and if you do not leave this room and me I will go out of it myself and ask one of the poor women below to take care of me. You had better go away. For your own sake you had better ; for some one will be here soon to take me home to my father ; not my brother whom you, coward as you are, tried to kill or injure for his love for me whom you had slandered to him ; but a relation as big and strong as yourself ; and you will not like *him* to find you here."

"You are a fool," cried Gerrant impatiently, "or rather, if you were to say you are mad now it would be truer. What, your relations have found you out, have they? and because your own hot-headedness and folly has driven you to starve in a hole like this you are ready to let them drag you back to be pointed and jeered at, held up to every one as an example of what evil girls come to, and only tolerated on sufferance in a house where every one will look down on you. Do you think you could bear *that*? Margaret, I know you better, better than you know yourself. I don't believe a word that you have been saying. You were miserable enough in that stagnant life yonder before. You would be a hundred times more miserable if you returned to it now."

"*Let me be, then!*" Margaret broke in defiantly. "I shall have deserved it;" but he would not listen to her.

"Hear me out, child. I think I am as mad as you; for all you say only makes me love you more. Upon my soul I believe I would rather have your hatred than another woman's affection; for I believe I could tame it soon; and I only. There, I will be honest with you—I never meant to marry. I am not fond

of the noose, but for your sake, and to soften those lovely, fierce eyes of yours, I will put my head into it, *with you*. Come, Fire-queen, are you appeased now? Do you believe in me now? Say yes, and I will prove it to you. I will take out the license to-morrow, and you may write and tell your relations that you want none of their charity, for you are Nino Gerrant's wife; unless, indeed, you would rather go back to drudge in penitence."

For one moment Margaret wavered. After all it was the only voice which had ever spoken to her of love. He was the only man to whom her heart had ever answered, and he was tempting her sorely—sorely. The next, she threw up her hands with a sort of cry :

"No; no. Go away from me. If I listened to you I should kill you. I would rather die. Oh! God help me!" she wailed out. "If Gordon were only here!"

He was within a couple of yards of her as she spoke; for in the same breath his right hand had closed in a grip like iron on Gerrant's collar, fairly lifting the artist off his feet, and by a prodigious effort of strength swinging him round and out of the room with such force, that, utterly taken by surprise,

Gerrant could not regain his feet, and would have gone headlong down the stairs if his downward course had not been broken midway by Tom Starling, who was just coming up them with the Vanning girls behind him, and who received him with such a shove in the chest as nearly took away the little breath he had left.

"Now then, Mister!" said Tom, glancing up at Gordon's fair flushed face and stalwart figure on the landing above, and comprehending the situation at a glance. "Whatever are you skyrocketing about other folks' 'ouses for? Don't you know decent manners yet, young man, that you must go intrudin' o' yerself into ladies' rooms without being hasked? I say, Fanny, if this 'ere's the painting gent you was speaking on, blest if he ain't taken to tumbling for a change of trade. Leastways you'd better go on an' tumble out o' 'ere double quick, my man, if you don't wish yer 'ead broke. We don't want no one arter the young women 'ere, as is too respec'able for the likes o' you," cried the builder, waxing wrathful as all his dormant jealousies of artists rose before him; and apparently Gerrant was of the same opinion. With Margaret deaf to all his appeals, and protected by the two men, he was not disposed to persist in efforts which

he felt could only end in his further humiliation, and would be sure to be repeated in every studio within twenty-four hours by the giggling models who were looking on. Muttering indistinct threats to the effect that Gordon might expect to hear from him soon, and making a vain attempt to carry himself jauntily, Nino Gerrant slunk away; and Ellice, looking from the cab-window, wondered where she had seen before the ill-conditioned, evil-eyed man who scowled at her as he hurried past. They none of them ever saw him again.

* * * * *

It is time now to return to Robin, who had come up to town that very day full of the importance of his mysterious friend's letter, and ignorant of all that was happening to those in whom he was so much interested. In the joy of his success with his mother and his irritation at Gordon's past meddling with Ellice's concerns, which he felt convinced now was the cause of the whole misunderstanding, the young man felt as if he could afford to dispense with his cousin's assistance in future. He would find his sister-for himself, and no

thanks to any man ; and as the first step to this, he resolved not to show Gordon the letter he had received ; but to go after the writer on his own account. He did so ; but found that the people at the post-office did not know the woman's address. She came there for her letters, but that was all. She had already been once that day, and might or might not come again ; so Robin had nothing for it but to write to her there, begging her to make an appointment with him and enclosing his own address : after which he dined at the club, and then, feeling that he could do no more that evening, and having a great longing to see Ellice and give her his mother's message, called a hansom and went off to Phillimore Gardens.

But here again disappointment awaited him, and of a sort wholly unexpected. Miss Ellice had left there, the servant said ; left for good the day before yesterday ; and Mrs. and Miss Devereux were dining out. No, she didn't know Miss Ellice's present address. She thought it was somewhere in London, for, at bidding good-bye, Miss Devereux had told her to come and see them often, and said the Underground was so handy ; but where it was she had no idea. So in the end poor

Robin was forced to go back to his hotel and to bed, feeling very much quenched and disheartened, and more than half inclined to swallow his pride and go off to knock up Gordon Maxwell. He little thought that that young man was then just arriving at the home he himself had so lately quitted, having left Margaret safely installed with Ellice under Mrs. Winstanley's care.

On the following morning, however, he received by the first post a letter in answer to that he had written last night. It was a mere scrawl signed "A. Grant," blurred and blotted, and evidently written in great haste; but it said the writer would be waiting to speak to him in the waiting-room of a railway station close by, almost as soon as he could have read the letter; and Robin went off without delay, and half fearing that he should find himself again disappointed.

This time however fate favoured him. The woman was there before him; and her first words, "Do you know who I am? I am Nino Gerrant's wife," relieved him of any doubts he might have had as to the honesty of her offers to help him. He was less gratified when he found that she was in greater trouble than

himself; and rather in want of than able to give assistance; and he was obliged to listen to her whole story before she would even give him any of the information she had.

It seemed that the poor creature had been married to Gerrant when he was much younger, and when he had been satisfied with the paternal name of Grant. Her father, however, had disapproved of the union, and it had taken place in secret in an out-of-the-way London church and under false names. She was only a girl of seventeen at the time, very weak and silly; so she thought it was all right, and as Gerrant took her abroad at once, and was for some time very kind to her, she was as happy as the day was long. With her first child, however, she had a long and serious illness from which she never thoroughly recovered, and which robbed her of nearly all her beauty. The child died after wailing out six months of sickly life, and Gerrant, who from the day of her illness had begun to neglect her, grew to be more and more cold and careless in his manner, and less and less at home. Then she began to grow jealous of the models, and they had desperate quarrels, which culminated in her threatening to leave

him, on which Gerrant turned round on her and told her with a brutal laugh that she might do so as soon as she liked. He had only kept her out of charity, for she was not his wife; their marriage, owing to the false names and some other informality, which she had known of, but had treated as a joke at the time, being invalid.

That turned her brain. She had been in a nervous, over-wrought state for a long time; and the cruel speech was too much for her. Fever came on; and when she recovered her senses it was to find that she had been insane a long time, and confined in an asylum, where she still was. Even then she was not well enough to be removed, her mind, though becoming daily more lucid, not being considered strong enough to admit of her going out into the world; and when she did at last do so, it was with a conviction of the truth of Gerrant's words which crushed her so completely as to take all hope out of her life except to hide herself away in some quiet corner and be forgotten. She was not penniless. Her father was dead, and had left her enough to keep herself in a small, poor way; and on this she lived for a couple of years, till the idea, gradu-

ally growing stronger and more fixed in her brain, that Gerrant might have only said it to frighten her, or had been wrong in his law, determined her to seek him out and try to right herself. She went to London accordingly, but he was gone. She did not even know the name of the church she was married at, and her vain efforts only told upon her health. She was going to York, when Robin first saw her, to hunt out an artist friend of Gerrant's, who had been present at their wedding. There she heard accidentally that her husband had written to some one that he was just starting for France, and she followed him.

"I thought if I could make him love me again, that even if we were not married, he might have it done now," she said. "He *did* love me once. Why shouldn't he do it again, Mr. Herne, if I can love him? But when you told me about that girl, and I overheard what he said to her in the Park, I saw I had very little chance. Still I tried. I spoke gently to him, and he pretended to be glad to see me, and was quite smooth and pleasant; but he never would for one moment speak as though I were his wife, and I felt sure he was only playing with me

to keep me quiet, and resolved to keep a watch on him. Yesterday he escaped me ; and though I went to his rooms I found he had gone out after lunch, leaving word he might not be back till late. I had bribed the servant, and she told me that he had written two letters to a ' Miss Herne, care of Miss Vanning, Shendleigh Street,' and had been very impatient because no answers had come to them. She believed that he had gone there now, for it was after asking again about them that he had muttered to himself: 'I was a fool to waste time. Better to have gone than written,' and had dressed himself very carefully and gone out."

"Gone out! Gone to Shendleigh Street? Is *that* where she is? And where is it? Oh! if I had only known this yesterday!" cried Robin, springing to his feet in a great state of agitation, and looking as if he were about to rush off then and there. Gerrant's disowned wife checked him, however.

"Wait! Why should you be so hasty? But you are only a boy, and boys are always hasty. You do not even know the number of the street; and I did not then, and the girl could not tell it me; but she said Miss

Vanning was a model and sat to Mr. Mather-son, the rustic painter ; for he had been calling on Gerrant and talking about her only the day before ; and knowing his house I went there and got the number of the girl's. It is five. Will you go there now with me. I think you will find her all right ; for Nino came back alone last night. I ascertained that."

"I will go this instant," said Robin. He was chafing at the delay he had already experienced, and would willingly have left his informant and dashed off on his own account. Margaret might be unwilling to see him ; or if she still cared for Gerrant their meeting might be a very painful one. There were a thousand doubts and difficulties to hamper him which had not troubled the mind of his one-ideaed cousin ; and if he could only have shaken Mrs. Grant off he would have been ungratefully happy. This was not to be, however, and together they arrived at Shend-leigh Street, creating an excitement there which they would have better understood had they known that a rumour had already got about that the Queen of Spain had been lying *perdu* at the Vannings' ; and that two "jukes," one of

her husband's party and one of the enemy's, had come after her yesterday ; the latter getting half killed for his pains.

Robin was as white as a sheet with excitement when he got to the top of the stairs ; and Fanny, who looked at him very distrustfully when he asked after his sister, nearly knocked him down by her short answer.

" I don't know nothink about your sister. If you mean Miss 'Erne, as we called Hester Vaughan, she's not here. A gentleman took 'er away yesterday."

A gentleman ! It was hard to say which repeated the word in greater agony of mind, Margaret's brother, or Gerrant's wife. Fanny soon saw that their description of themselves was genuine, and proceeded to explain that Miss Herne was quite safe. Her cousin had come for her ; and there was a fair young lady waiting for her in the cab below, who had kissed her ever so, and cried with gladness at seeing her.

" For that matter they'd all cried, her an' Lottie, and Miss 'Erne wust of all, she were so overset by that Gerrint's coming ;" and then Miss Vanning described with such gusto, not to say exaggeration, how the fair

gentleman had half killed Gerrant, that when Robin looked round he saw that poor Alice Grant had disappeared, probably to hasten to the side of the wounded and ingrate spouse who had deserted her. But Fanny had a great disappointment for him. In the confusion and agitation of departure she had heard without remembering Mrs. Winstanley's address ; and could only tell him it was somewhere near ; and described it as a place where they took in poor women's babies to mind for the day. "Miss 'Erne" had promised to write to her, and so had the tall fair gentleman ; but Robin could not wait for that, and departed leaving Fanny almost overwhelmed with thanks for what she had told him ; and considerably richer than she had got up that morning.

He went to Gordon's office ; and found that he was away on leave of absence ; then to the clergy-house, and heard he had gone down to the country the night before ; but was expected back that day ; after which poor Robin could do nothing but say that he would call again, and go and get some food which he much wanted. He was too excited, however, to feel tired, and in the joy and wonder

of knowing that Margaret was found, was *with* his own Ellice, and under Gordon's protection, he almost forgot that it was his high-minded resolve to owe nothing more to that gentleman which had kept himself in the dark as to what had happened. He could have hugged Gordon for having taken Ellice to Margaret. He could have kissed Ellice's feet for the kisses she had given his sister. He was in such a turbulent state of mind that minutes seemed hours to him ; and he paid three visits to the clergy-house before he heard that Gordon was in ; and then nearly knocked his cousin down with the effusiveness of his greeting.

Young Maxwell himself was as cool as a cucumber.

" You did not write to say you were coming up from the Croft, so I fancied you were there ; or I should have telegraphed to you at your club. Yes, I went down to your home last night, broke the news to your mother ; and came up by the first train this morning, bringing a note for your sister ; and your father's old factotum, James, with me. He took the girls back by the mid-day train ; and I was going round to you when I got back here, only I heard you had called."

"They are gone then!" said Robin. "If I had only known! and Ellice *too*? Ellice with her?"

"Margaret would not have gone without Ellice," said Gordon stiffly; "and your mother sent a special message to her, begging her to return. Otherwise she would have stayed where she was, and where she was much wanted."

"Bother her being wanted!" cried Robin, ignoring the stiffness altogether, and with a face beaming all over. "I should think *we* wanted her a deal more, the darling! Quite right that the mother did send for her. She never ought to have let her go away, and she knows it now. Look here, old fellow," planting both hands on Gordon's shoulders, "you know how I love Ellice, and that I've asked her to be my wife a dozen times. It has been only this abominable business that has come between us; but that's settled now, and I got my mother's consent only the other day, and explained it all to her. Won't you wish me luck and go down with me this evening? Of course I shall start by the earliest train. Indeed I wonder you didn't go with *them*."

"I thought I should only be in the way

there, and that they would be better by themselves," said Gordon, still stiffly. "James would take every care of them. Besides, I have my work to attend to, and I'm going to the office now. I have lost time enough already. Of course you must do as you please about going to your own house."

"Then you won't wish me joy with Ellice?" said Robin, mortified. "At least, however, you must let me thank you for all that you have done for us. I am sure I don't know how we shall ever be grateful enough to you."

Gordon grunted.

"I don't know that Ellice will have you yet. If she does, I will wish you joy; and if not, you can show your gratitude by letting her alone and not persecuting her. As for me, I haven't done anything to deserve thanks." And he marched off.

Certainly Robin had some cause to consider his cousin a bear that morning.

CHAPTER XII.

I WILL pass over the details of Margaret's reception at home. There are things that can be imagined better than described ; joys so intimately woven with pain that one may feel them perhaps all the more intensely for the impossibility of putting them into words, and this was one of them.

Mrs. Herne's note to Margaret had contained only these words :

"Father and I are thanking God over our daughter's recovery. Do not lose an hour in coming back to us, my child. All is forgiven; but we want you sorely."

While to Gordon she said :

"Tell Ellice, with my dear love, that I can't ask her to forgive us for misdoubting her. If she wants to show me that she has done so, she'll forget she is not my own

child already, and will come back to me never to go away from us again. Robin will say more to her than I can."

It was not to be wondered at that within an hour of the receipt of these two messages the girls started on their homeward journey: even Margaret's strong agitation and nervousness, controlled by the assurance, repeatedly impressed on her by Gordon, that so far from her flight being known and the scandal of it bruited about, it had been kept so jealously hidden, that only old Martha knew that she and Ellice were not away somewhere on a visit till the Squire was better, and that it depended now on her own courage and self-command to keep up the fiction and save her family from deeper mortification and vulgar gossip.

It was not without forethought that old James had been sent up to town to bring the young ladies back from the friend with whom they had been staying, and Mrs. Herne had announced to the household the previous night that the Squire was so much better that he had expressed a wish for his girls, so they would return next day. She was afraid poor Miss Maggie would be dreadfully upset

at the sight of him. She was 'always so devoted to him, for all her silent way, that it had been partly from fear of the effect of his stroke on her that she had been kept away so long; and she feared it had been a great grief to her, poor child, but sick people's fancies must be consulted, and the master hadn't been able to bear any voice but hers till now.

There is a beautiful story contained in one of Miss Proctor's ballads of a nun who broke her vows and fled from her convent, returning after years of sin and folly, to find that her guardian angel had kept her place all the time, and with such gracious completeness that the sisters were even unaware of her defection. Mrs. Herne had been her daughter's guardian angel, and Margaret came home to find her "place was kept." She had nothing to do but to go back into it as in days of yore. The mother's love had spared her all that her proud nature had most shrunk from. Yet there was no word spoken when she found herself at last in that mother's arms; and no human eye, not even Mrs. Herne's, beheld the meeting between Margaret and her father.

Robin arrived about eight o'clock that same evening, and walking unannounced into the

parlour, found his mother resting in the big arm-chair by the fire, with a look of peace on her face which had not been seen there for many a week back, and Ellice seated on a low stool at her feet, her fair little head leaning against the arm of the chair in the old way, and her hand held fondly in that of her mother friend. The young man's entrance of course put an immediate change on the face of the tableau, Mrs. Herne jumping up to kiss and welcome him, and whisper that Maggie was upstairs with her father, and was not coming down again that evening. The Squire had not let her out of his sight all day, but she was looking sadly shaken and tired, and had promised to go to bed early ; while Ellice stood up trembling all over, and changing from red to white in a very lovely manner, but which rather belied the efforts she was making to look as if she was not agitated in the least. Mrs. Herne had already told her of all Robin had said on his last visit, an account which so contradicted the hand-kissing which she herself had seen, that she began to feel as if her eyes had deceived her, or as if there might be some explanation of the performance besides that of her lover's fickleness.

Still she did not know how he had taken her refusal to see him that day, and her leaving the Devereuxes'; and was so afraid to look at him that when she found her shyly outstretched hand coolly disregarded, and herself taken into her lover's arms and kissed, positively kissed, before his mother's face, she was so utterly astounded and bewildered that she almost cried out in her amazement. What *would* Mrs. Herne think of such conduct? But Mrs. Herne seemed to think it was all right, for she smiled most benignantly, and merely said :

"Now, Robbie, don't eat her up. You've frightened all the colour out of the maid's face, poor child, with your roughness."

After which the good woman declared that she must go and see after the master, and put her other daughter to bed; and so trotted away, leaving the young lovers to themselves.

It was a very long operation that making the Squire comfortable for the night, and putting Margaret to bed in her own little room again—her room which looked so exquisitely fresh and pure and dainty to her after the dingy closet at the Vannings. Probably the repentant girl found more to say to

her mother than she had had time to do as yet. At any rate, it was nearly ten o'clock when Mrs. Herne came down again, and then her eyes were very red, though a kind smile came into them when she saw that Robin had taken her place in the arm-chair, and Ellice had subsided on to her stool again, and that both were looking so blissfully happy, that it was plain that if there had been any clouds between them, they had all been swept away in that cosy *tête-à-tête* by the home fire.

It was evident that if the sun was to shine on Herncroft again it would be through these two young creatures, to whom the past trouble had only been a link to bind them together more fondly and faithfully than any ordinary wooing could have done.

When the Squire saw Ellice on the following day, he took her face in his shaking hands and kissed it, saying :

"Bless thee, child. So thou'rt to be our child now for good ! Well, well, I never guessed a maid from over seas would come to be mistress of the old place ; but I doubt not the lad's chosen well, for all that, Maid Ellice ; an', fares to me, thou must ha' good Saxon blood in thee to love it an' us so well."

But Robin and Ellice were not to be married yet. Let not the reader suppose so. Owing to the poor Squire's infirmity making it improbable that he would ever be able to manage the farm again, it was desirable that his son should be at his side to manage in his place, and relinquish his previous idea of going into the law, unless indeed a steward were to be hired for the purpose instead. But to this alternative the Squire had a great objection; and Robin himself, with the prospect of a wife before him, and the experience he had gained of how ill London agreed with Ellice in comparison with the bracing Downshire air, was ready to give up all his forensic ambition, and would even have left college at once if it had not been his father's own wish that he should finish his course there and take his degree.

To Oxford accordingly he returned that term, and remained there another year before he returned for good; and almost immediately commenced seeing to the painting, altering, and furnishing of a certain pretty cottage residence, about three quarters of a mile from the Croft, and on the road to their other property at Hardleigh End.

All sorts of pretty things were brought

down from London to this cottage ; and Margaret and Ellice used to walk across the fields on summer evenings to see how it got on, and make suggestions as to this or that improvement ; after which Robin generally escorted them home, full of triumph at the way in which it was progressing, and not unfrequently adding in an undertone which brought a bright blush into the cheek of the little maiden on his arm :

“ And remember, as soon as *it* is ready for you, you will be for me, that’s a bargain, eh, Ellice ? ”

Lottie Vanning and her sweetheart, however, had not waited for the day that saw Ellice leave Merehatch church a bride. You see there was no degree to be taken, or house built and furnished in their case ; but Lottie had her “ parlour to herself and best chiney,” according to her old aspirations ; and the Hernes could have told very accurately both where the said “ chiney ” (gilt roses on a pink ground) and the bran-new furniture of the parlour came from, not to say the smart gowns which Lottie and her sister wore at the marriage ceremony, and the rent of the tidy little room just above Mrs. Starling’s which poor

Fanny occupied during the short remaining years of her life.

I have dwelt thus far on the happy side of this home reunion, and the pleasant peal and jingle of wedding bells, because there has been a great deal of sadness already in this plain, unvarnished story of mine, and I would fain wind up in a brighter key, and to that brightest and sweetest of all human strains, the marriage hymn, consummating innocent and happy loves. That there was a shadier and a sadder side to it none could doubt who had ever seen the white head and bowed figure of the old Squire when he was taken out in his wheeled chair on the sunny side of the house in the bright mornings, or the paled cheek and sorrowful lines about the mouth of the girl who never left his side, but sat by him and ministered to him with an untiring patience and tenderness of which those who had known her before could hardly believe her to be capable, and which used to make Mrs. Herne complain in a half-playful manner that she was only second fiddle to Maggie in looking after the master. She knew well that this consecration of her life to her father's service was the greatest comfort left to the

girl whose early imprudence had left such a shadow on her life.

For Margaret had a very heavy cross to bear; and it pressed heaviest on her in the first year or so which followed her escapade. Notwithstanding all the care taken to keep the latter secret; notwithstanding the advertisement "To Maggie," still inserted in the *Times* for weeks after she was known to be back in her place at home; and the unblushing lies told by the whole family when called on to discuss the girls' whereabouts, etc., during their absence—lies in which the motive was so pure and tender that, if it were not unorthodox, I could almost think they were forgiven in the uttering: there were people who suspected something, and liked to keep their suspicions alive by frequent ventilation, people who said that it was very funny she should have gone away so suddenly, the very night the Squire had that stroke, too! And pray what brought on the latter in a man so hale and strong? Then some one had seen her talking to an artist gentleman on St. Anne's Hill; and there were even floating rumours of visits paid by a tall, dark young lady to the said artist's studio at Mitcham, and a clandes-

tine correspondence kept up between that place and Miss Herne through the post-mistress at Merehatch. Every one who knows the painful avidity for even the smallest and tamest bit of gossip in an English village will understand how eagerly these floating bits of scandal got repeated about and gathered together and made more of by each contributor's dividend of surmise and exaggeration ; how Mrs. Calthorpe shook her head grimly, and declared she had always said there must be something very wrong about a girl who had shirked parish work and abjured Sunday-school, and generally conducted herself with the unbecoming independence from all authority which Margaret had always shown : how Miss Pelter asked suggestive questions of everybody in anxious whispers and with ruffled forehead and lifted brows ; how Dr. Brown declined to make any answers on the subject in a stiff "I-know-more-than-I-say" manner, which raised curiosity ten times higher ; and how the Vicar, when told of the current reports respecting his young parishioner, and called upon to say *something* about them, looked up from his folios and answered mildly that in the first place he

didn't believe any of them, and, in the next, that if it were possible that Margaret had run away and been brought back, he didn't see why she shouldn't have done the former by herself. That Romaic type of feature and colouring were never found without a corresponding strain in the character. Indeed the gipsy "wander-mania" had been known, even after lying dormant through more than one generation of mixed blood, to burst out with irrepressible force in some descendant otherwise as civilised and commonplace as any of its neighbours ; and was going on pleasantly to prove from more than one authority that this mania generally showed itself in the male sex between ten and fourteen, and in the female between sixteen and nineteen, when he was abruptly silenced by his spouse, who told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself for talking such a heap of heterodox absurdity ; that he might as well say no one was accountable for anything at that rate, and that she had no patience with him—a remark so indisputably true that the Vicar only raised his hands and answered mildly :

"My dear, I know it. It is the principal flaw in your otherwise amiable character, and

is the chief reason why I have not been as severe as you wished with our youngest boy's exceedingly dictatorial and impatient disposition. Hereditary failings require far greater gentleness and forbearance than any other."

But though the Vicar might think thus, other people sided with his wife and Miss Pelter; and though no one knew anything for certain, there was a disposition among many, while the scandal lasted, to drop intimacy at the Croft, pass Margaret with a cool nod, and generally keep the girl at a distance—a line of conduct which she who had so long voluntarily held aloof from her neighbours now felt all the more keenly from her consciousness of its deservedness. She had a great deal to bear that winter; and perhaps not the least part of it was seeing how lovingly those about her tried to shield her from the punishment in which they, though innocent, were sharing; but I think that on the whole it was good for her character. It is impossible for people to brave all social laws and proprieties as Margaret had done, and yet come off unscathed in name and fame when their freak is over; and perhaps it is well for public order and morality that it

should be so. The gossip wore itself out in time, as all gossip does even in the pettiest community unless it has something to revive or confirm it; and as Margaret had, as I have said, never grown intimate with her neighbours, and always avoided their invitations, unless compelled to the contrary, it was not easy for them to take the initiative in ostracising her now. Her still more rigid adherence then to her old habits in that respect caused less remark than it might otherwise have done, more especially now when her father's infirmity gave a proper and valid reason for it. As long as *he* lived her days belonged to him; and though, even after his death, she still held to her rule of life, avoiding society when practicable, and devoting herself to her mother and Ellice's children instead, her own family found her gentler, humbler, and more sympathetic than it had once seemed probable that she could ever become. The shadow of her girlish escapade still hung over her own soul, and would rest there till the day of her death, but it had had a softening rather than an embittering influence, and had been long swept away from the memory of those about her. One thing was certain; from the day of

her return that morbid craving for excitement, for strangers' faces, and the roar of cities which had haunted her like a fever dream, corroding her quiet life, never troubled her again. She had lived with that roar in her ears night and day, when its ceaseless turmoil nearly drove her mad, when wherever her yearning eyes turned they had found nothing but the faces of strangers looking carelessly on her, when her life had been one long nervous excitement of suspense and pain, wearing out mind and body alike. From the day she got back to her native hills, to the gurgling of reed-hidden streamlets and fragrance of wild thyme and prickly gorse, her one desire was never to leave them again; and the only occasion when she almost had a quarrel with Robin, was when he had planned to take a week in Paris on purpose to give her the treat of seeing it, and she had obstinately refused to go.

And Gordon Maxwell?

For nearly fifteen months after the morning when he finished his work for Margaret by seeing the two girls into the train for Downshire, the family at the Croft saw and heard next to nothing of that worthy, but unsociable,

young man. As a matter of fact he was plodding away day after day at his old work, between the engineer's office and the Holborn back slums ; but he never came to the Croft, and seldom even wrote to Ellice. Since her engagement, indeed, he felt as if his moral guardianship had ceased. She did not appeal to him now for guidance in all her little difficulties. If she had any there was Robin to go to instead ; and besides being a much more indulgent guardian angel, Robin's strictures on her cousin's previous counsels, and the misunderstandings which had arisen through her obeying them, made her shrink from putting herself under the same authority again. She wrote often to him, but her letters were, as was natural, full of innocent talk about her lover, his achievements and opinions ; all of which was exceedingly frivolous and uninteresting to the reader, and made him feel as if she had come down very much from the pinnacle of unworldliness on which he had striven to place her. There was no love lost between the two young men, for Robin could not forgive Gordon's churlishness and interference with regard to Ellice ; and even Mrs. Herne said the lad was a sad bungler, and was

offended at his not coming oftener to see them, wishing that he were more sociable and like other people. Only two held staunchly to him, and would never hear a word in his dispraise; the Squire, who stuck to it that, though he himself had been to blame, "the lad were right an' honest fur taking the Maid Ellice out of a house where he found her guardian's son were makin' love to her wi'out the old man's consent. He didn't care if 't had been done clumsily, or if mistakes had come of it. 'Twas an upright, straightforward, course to take, an' he respected the man as took it." While Margaret, though she seldom uttered his name, thought of him always as her saviour and defender, the man who had rescued her from Gerrant and self-murder, and put her conduct and duty before her as no one else had ever done.

She saw him once again at the end of a year, when he was induced to spend Christmas at the Croft, and when he gave most of his attention to her, and their friendship became additionally strengthened, and after that never any more; for on his return to London he found a letter containing the news of his father's death; and one month later he entered

the theological training college for priests at Hammersmith, with a gladness at renouncing the world and its vanities (of which he knew so little!) which was only sobered by the thought that he owed the granting of his life's desire to the death rather than the kindness of a man who, faulty and erring as he might be, had been his own parent.

"But I did my duty to him while he lived. I gave up my own will for his; and I believe that if his soul—God rest it!—could come back, it would be the first to speed me onward now," the young man wrote to Ellice; and, considering that he had not seen his father since, he was a mere boy, and had never received any affection or kindness from him since, it could hardly perhaps be expected that he would grieve very deeply over his loss.

One more sketch and I have done.

It is a summer's afternoon at the Croft. Under the great beech-tree on the lawn there is cool, green shade; but beyond, the air is quivering in a haze of golden heat over beds of fragrant mignonette, old-fashioned stocks and dusky purple heliotrope. Huge velvety roses, creamy, pink and crimson, burst asunder from sheer weight of sun-blown beauty, and

fall petal by petal on the parched soil. Tall, scarlet gladioli flicker in the sunbeams like spiral tongues of flame. Even the grey old house glows in the regal glory of the yellow jasmine and purple clematis, which wreath its ancient front. It is a relief to look under the boughs of the beech, where, as in a shadowy tent of soft emerald light, sits a slim young mother, fair as a lily, and the incarnation of one of Müller's Madonnas in her cool blue linen gown, with the coils of light gold hair crowning her small head, and on her knee an infant fair and white as herself in its long draperies. Another child, a little girl about three years old and with Robin's merry dark eyes, is rolling on the grass, making a pyramid of the tiny brown scales and nuts which have fallen from the beech-tree; and the mother is reading a letter with a smile on her pretty lips. It is laid down however the next moment, though the smile deepens into a still sweeter expression; for some one parts the branches, and, coming into the pleasant shadow, flings himself down with a sigh of relief at her side.

"Tired, Robin *mio*?" says Ellice, laying her cool hand on his brow. "You look it."

"Well, I am a little. I had to go to the Hall to see Sir George about that horse he wishes me to buy ; and then I went out of my way to call at the Cottage coming back. By the way, the Amadrews want us to dine there on Thursday. I said you would go."

"That was bad of you when you know I don't like leaving baby while he's so young. However, they are so very friendly and cordial; and if it is your will and pleasure, sir ! But how were the mother and Maggie ?"

"Well as they can be ; and Maggie deep in her books. My old study at the Cottage she has made hers now, and mother says she is learning mad since she first decided to undertake the teaching of wee Daisy here ;" and he began tickling and pulling the brown curls of the round-limbed, laughing damsel who was already seated astride across his chest. "Who's your letter from, Ellie ?"

"Gordon. You must read it ; for it is very interesting. If he had only not volunteered to go to that fever-stricken swamp, and where the natives are so treacherous too ! but he seems hard at work from morning till night, and as happy as a king. What a change

there is in his letters, Robin ! There is never any dryness in them now, and he seems to enter into our home life and sympathies so much more than he did. He likes to hear all my anecdotes of Daisy, and wants Margaret to try and make a sketch of her for him ; and there is a whole list of books he thinks will be useful to Margaret in her reading. I must show her the letter, she will be pleased."

"Ah ! he was always a priest and missionary at heart," said Robin ; "and a man in his own groove is as different from one out of it as a man swimming with the stream from one buffeting against it and fighting with every wave that opposes him. The square stick in a round hole, makes its angles felt at each turn of the circle. Father Gordon among those precious black scamps, his converts, is a much jollier fellow than Gordon Maxwell, Esq., who——" but a hand is laid on his mouth, and he is not allowed to go on.

"Be quiet !" says his pretty wife imperiously. "He was a dear old Galahad then, though he did make mistakes sometimes and want all the world to be cut to his own pattern ;

and I am very glad I called baby after him. Their eyes are just alike."

She little thought that the blue eyes she spoke of were even then closed in death; and that long before Margaret's sketch could reach him, his body, pierced through and through by Indian arrows, had been buried at the foot of the primitive little altar where he had been shot down while giving the Bread of Life to a couple of his dusky converts.

There was a smile, bright and triumphant as the light of God, upon his face, when they heaped the sods above it.

THE END.

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